

A BOOK
of
CREATIVITY

David Ehrlich

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PREFACE

WHEN HE HEARD THAT I WAS WRITING A BOOK like this, my brother-in-law Josef, who teaches sculpture at the Vienna Art Academy, shook his head incredulously, "How can you *teach* someone how to be creative? Either he is or he isn't." Well, Josef was right, of course. You can't teach someone how to be creative. However, it is possible to help people understand the circumstances that can block or enhance the creativity THEY ALREADY HAVE.

This is not an "inspirational, New Age" book. I assume that you are a creative person and that I need not indulge in visionary imagery to inspire your confidence in creativity as a daily part of your life. This book is also not a theoretical study deconstructing the processes of creativity through which great artists may have gone. This book is a practical manual that will help you to understand the circumstances that may block the creativity that you possess and by this increased understanding, to strengthen the flow of your creative through-lines.

I think you'll find many things of use in these pages. The first chapter explores the importance of communicating, of reaching out to others as one of the motive forces behind creative work. It also addresses some of the problem areas of both the professional world and daily life that occasionally impinge upon our desire to do creative work such as criticism, competition and general survival and suggests a number of ways of coping with them more effectively.

Chapter 2 looks at the issues involved in various life styles and their relationship to creative work. How can we use aspects of living in the city or the country to stimulate and enhance our creativity? What are the elements of either solitary or collaborative work that may inspire us? What is the value of all the rituals and precursors to creative work, and how can we best organize our immediate physical environment so that it best contributes to a creative working atmosphere?

Chapter 3 first focuses in on what is often the most difficult step in the creative process, getting started. It then goes on to explore work rhythms and discipline, internal and external deadlines, and creative withdrawal.

Chapter 4 offers an extensive account of work block and ways of both preventing and lessening its effects. It uses examples from the lives of professionals and non-professionals to illustrate sensible solutions that have helped others work through what can otherwise become a serious impediment to one's confidence and ability to work.

Chapter 5 helps you to understand and combat various other demons that haunt all creative people at one time or another such as over-verbalization, undeveloped work, and fear of completion, exhaustion, depression, and identity crises. The chapter ends with an ode to the wonderful work created by senior artists in this day and throughout history.

There are, I'm afraid, no authoritative answers. Every creative person has experienced the ebb and flow of inspiration. Even Picasso in his later years would have to be cajoled by his mistress into getting to work upon waking up. And the fact that it has taken me fifteen years in stops and starts to complete this book hardly serves to establish me as your role model. On the other hand, it has made me more empathetic of the problems we all face and more seriously motivated to write a book that would be of some help in dealing with them.

There are a number of examples drawn from the lives of professional creators as well as ordinary people who wanted to try something new. These examples remain anonymous for the most part, to ensure the privacy of the many good people who crossed my path as clients, students, friends, and colleagues. Some of the examples, in fact, are really syntheses of several different people drawn more clearly to illustrate a point. There is often quite a bit of myself in these people, and I hope these examples may help you to identify with a given problem or solution and thereby lead to a greater understanding of yourself.

Finally, all royalties from sales of this book will be donated to the ASIFA Animation Workshops for the creative education of children in developing countries. ASIFA (The International Association of Film Animation) is affiliated with UNESCO and has national chapters in over 35 countries with over 3000 members. The primary goal of the ASIFA Workshops is to encourage children throughout the world to create

animation together in peace and friendship. It seemed fitting that any proceeds from our work on *A Book of Creativity* go toward the creativity of our children.

—David Ehrlich, December 2002

PART I: POSITIONS

CHAPTER 1

INTEGRATING LIFE AND WORK

JIM, A STRUGGLING PAINTER, HAD TRIED for some time to keep his artwork separate from the day-to-day details of his life. He found that paying the bills, struggling at survival work, sustaining friendships and marriage, and even such trivial things as emptying the garbage, tended to lose him valuable time and, moreover, to lose him his creative focus. Whenever he was building towards a show, he would isolate himself entirely from such things, letting the chips fall where they may, and retrieving the material aspects of his life as best he could after his creative period.

His next show became an unusually significant hope for his career. It was to be at one of the best galleries in New York, with the promise of a number of serious reviews and the presence, at the opening, of some of the best-known collectors in the area. Three months before the opening, he locked himself in his studio with his art materials and enough apples and yogurt for a few weeks, letting his wife understand that she was to handle all of the day-to-day details of their existence. This was to be his biggest opportunity yet, and he felt that his life had not produced so many of them (or would) that he couldn't afford to lose a single one. Under such an external pressure, Jim wanted to think only of his work. He knew that it would take two to three weeks of the three months just to disconnect from his everyday life and that he'd need some time at the end to reconnect before he presented himself, as well as his work, at the opening.

Things went well at the beginning. He set his answering machine and email account with messages that he'd be away for an extended time and got down to business sooner than he had expected. He began to feel his full power as an artist at work and saw his canvases begin to develop in quantum leaps forward. He was happy that he was able to separate his work time from his life like this and hoped that nothing would disturb this separation before the show.

After the second week, a fax came through. Jim knew he shouldn't read it, but after all, it could be serious. He gingerly lifted it out and read a message from Harold, the owner of his gallery. In three days, there would be a party where Harold wished to introduce Jim to some collectors who would be more apt to attend Jim's opening if they knew him beforehand. Harold requested the courtesy of an answer. Whether or not Jim decided to go, he knew that he had to call Harold and speak to him. He wasn't feeling particularly verbal at the moment and felt moreover a little vulnerable. But after trying unsuccessfully to return to his work for an hour, Jim picked up the phone and called. Harold managed to convey the great importance to Jim's career of these people and expressed surprise that Jim would even consider not coming. Jim said, ok, he'd come, and hung up the phone. He then called his wife, Nancy, at home and asked that she come with him. Nancy's voice seemed a bit anxious, so Jim asked if anything was up. Nancy paused. Jim pressed her. Nancy thought, well, ok, as long as his work was interrupted anyway, I'd better tell him about the burst in the water pipe and an urgent call from his mother...

The next time Jim got back to work was the morning after the party. He had spent the past two days dealing with the build-up of problems occurring in his life, and because he had become so withdrawn and vulnerable, each problem had reverberated, seeming to present another and another in its wake. The party had been all right, surprisingly. Everyone had been happy to see him, expressing great interest and curiosity in his new work, and Jim had found himself describing the piece he was working on, even to the point of verbalizing a solution that he had not yet developed. Now, as Jim went back to that canvas, there was a feeling of emptiness, irritation at everyone around him, and a great feeling of pressure. The solution he had talked about no longer seemed particularly exciting, and he just couldn't see that piece the same way he had a few days before. After a few hours looking at it, he put it in the rack and pulled out an empty canvas. The broad white expanse proved even more intimidating. He put on his jacket and went out to browse at the neighborhood bookstore.

Two weeks later, Jim had completed no more work. He had been drinking more than usual, had a serious argument with his wife, accusing her of keeping him from being an artist, and was now fed up with all the "games" associated with galleries and critics and collectors and hack artists.

At the opening of his show, Jim was very nervous. He tried to make himself believe that the work hung on the walls was the best that he could do, that it was a great leap forward from his last show. He was certainly able to verbalize the conceptual framework to the critics. In the absence of real painting for the last few weeks, he had spent his time developing explanations about what the work he had done *really* meant. But as he circulated around the room, listening to congratulations from his friends, he felt more and more empty and alone. He left the opening earlier than he had planned, going to the nearest bar. He thought he'd have a drink, collect his thoughts, and then go back. He never did return to that opening.

Jim's story is neither tragic, nor particularly unique. Most of us find it difficult to integrate our creative work with the life that surrounds us. We can wrestle throughout a lifetime with various accommodations to reality. But for an artist, the continual tension resulting from this confrontation often proves to be exhausting at just those times that maximum energy and concentration are required for creative work. Jim's method of withdrawal only brought greater problems later on. And his inability to understand the layered complexities through which he was navigating made him especially vulnerable to his own unspoken needs and fears. To further complicate the matter, Jim resorted to prematurely talking about his work, thereby compromising its full organic development. The end result was not only a depression surrounding an event that might otherwise have been a triumph for him, but a further downward spiral towards an extended work block from which it took Jim several months to pull out.

This book is written for all of us Jim's who want to understand ourselves a little better, who want to use that understanding to help us make the difficult choices that must be made. As you read these pages, you'll see there are a number of interconnecting problems Jim faced, with a greater number of choices that Jim might have made more consciously.

As you explore the problems and solutions of the various creative people in these pages, you will, I hope, see a little of yourself and learn a bit more, awakening your capacity to gain control over those elements of your life that can affect the quality of work and your fulfillment in doing it. You may take very much for granted the capacity for integrating the elements of your craft. That same capacity can be utilized to explore different ways of putting together the pieces of everyday existence so that they may support your art rather than conflict with it.

A. COMMUNICATION

IN 1973, I VISITED A MENTAL HOSPITAL OUTSIDE VIENNA to observe the remarkable work Dr. Leo Navratil had been doing with patients who would not respond to traditional treatment. A newly arrived patient, Hans, was guided to the office in which Navratil was sitting at his desk, writing. Navratil looked up, greeted Hans, and gently motioned him to sit at a small table across the room that held some sheets of paper, pencils and crayons. Slowly, Hans sat and looked at the doctor. Navratil continued to work by himself, from time to time looking up from his work and smiling gently at the patient. Hans was clearly under no expectation to do or to say anything. After about an hour, the attendant returned and guided Hans back to the communal ward. A few days later, Hans was returned to the office and sat again at the table across from Navratil. After a half hour of sitting there, almost motionless, Hans slowly picked up a pencil, played with it a bit, and then made a kind of scribble on the paper. At the end of the period, Navratil stood up from his desk and, showing an honest interest in the scribbling, walked over to the table, picked up the drawing and taped it to the wall with a smile of appreciation. The next visit, Hans walked in and saw the drawing on the wall, along with drawings by other patients. He sat down at the table and, after a few minutes looking at the blank paper in front of him, he picked up a crayon and began to scribble a bit more.

At the end of the session, Navratil again walked to the table, picked up the drawing and taped it to the wall next to Hans' last drawing. A few days later, as I was sitting in Navratil's office, I saw Hans coming down the hallway. As he passed the open door of the office, I saw him glance in to see his drawings still hanging on the wall. Navratil happened to be there with another patient, but he motioned to Hans to come in and showed the other patient Hans' drawings on the wall, telling both patients that they were free to come by at certain times with their friends to show them their work. Little by little, as had happened with a number of other patients, Hans' drawings developed into statements, reflecting the moods, the pain or calm of the man. And the drawings became a means of communication between Hans and Navratil and between Hans and other patients.

After a number of months of development, the work created by Hans and other patients would be hung in a group show of Naive Art ("Art Brut") at a Viennese Art Gallery that specialized in work of this sort. At that time, the patient would be permitted to board the bus that passed by the hospital and take the hour's ride into Vienna for the opening of his show. He would walk into the room, drink some wine, eat a few *hors d'oeuvres*, and chat amiably with the guests. Society matrons and professors at the Academy might express their pleasure in his work and ask him how long he had been an artist. Or they might simply stand before his work and smile, and he would stand behind them, looking at them, and smile. A man like Hans, whom other treatment centers had designated as untreatable and incommunicative would take the bus home to the hospital, chatting gaily to whomever he happened to be sitting next to on the bus.

Dr. Navratil's treatment graphically illustrates the importance of reaching out to others through one's work. Of course, the creation of the work is not necessarily *for* other people. In fact, fine work often arises when the artist thinks only of his art and of his own relationship to it, quite apart from any connection to the external world. But when it is completed, work detaches itself, gains its own life, and will die unless it communicates with someone. That someone may be a lover, a good friend, a stranger, or perhaps a child who experiences and deeply connects to that work. This is not a question of appreciating or of respecting, but simply of *experiencing*.

I remember when I first entered kindergarten classes, alone and terrified, Mrs. Pierson, a gentle teacher with beautiful long blonde hair, seemed to know at once how I was feeling. She waited until the first break, walked over to my seat, and began to tell me how all the children must be as nervous as she was. She reached into her pocket for the biggest red crayon I had ever seen and asked me to draw something on the paper on my desk. I must have spent the rest of the morning drawing away, completely forgetting where I was, for when I looked up the class was ending. Mrs. Pierson then said, "You should know we have an artist in the class," looking at me. As I was leaving a few minutes later, she came up to me smiling and said, "David, why don't you keep the crayon? I can see you like to draw."

That evening in my room, I took the crayon out of my pocket, sat down at the table, and began to draw on a clean piece of white paper. I drew a big red flower with petals flowing out like radiations from the sun, and under it I drew a big red pot. I

thought it was a grand work, the very first one I had ever done that even looked like what I wanted it to look like. I carefully folded it up and went to sleep. The next morning, I remember my mother saying as she fixed breakfast, "David, you look as if you can't wait to get to school this morning."

Once at school, I waited until I saw Mrs. Pierson alone for a moment in the cloakroom, and went to her. As she smiled that beautiful smile, I reached in my pocket and pulled out the folded drawing, which was now just a little crumpled. "Why what is this?" she laughed, and unfolded it. Then she grew very silent and *really looked at it*. She bent down, kissed me on the cheek, and said she was going to keep it a long time so she could remember me after I graduated.

From the simplest level of giving and communicating, our need develops to communicate with more and more people, just as we meet and relate to more and more people as we grow. We first share with people we love and respect, then little by little we want to share with strangers who can come to know and understand us through our art. Of course, those close to us will be more likely to experience our work because they know us. With strangers, there is the risk of drawing a blank, of a missed connection. This point is one of the most difficult issues for the creator—that the offering will be refused in some way or taken amiss.

It is always valuable to remember this aspect of "offering" in every presentation, to admit the tenderness latent within our more sophisticated intentions and to understand the problems involved with trying to make such an offering within the commercial presentation structures available. It is not easy for us to have our work rejected or even ignored. And it's the anticipation of that pain which may even prevent us from creating or stop us in the process. I was lucky to have a kindergarten teacher who could experience fully what I was giving her. But, I've not always been so lucky. I've presented professional work as a gift to people who merely shrugged good-naturedly, and I've presented films to strangers at film festivals who booed. Painful as these moments were, I've tried to persist in the offerings. It's my choice, and need, to communicate in these ways, and I've tried to remain aware of the fact that I really have no control over others' reception of that communication. I am risking myself, and it's seemed to be worth the risk. One of the things that most helps, seems to be the clear understanding of the problem—of my vulnerability, of the choice that I do make, and of the fact that each offering and the response to it is unique and independent of any other.

Always, there's the hope that there will be a Mrs. Pierson out there the next time who will really grow silent and look at the work and really know.

B. CRITICISM

AFTER WE OFFER CREATIVE WORK TO OTHERS, there comes a point when, instead of responding with a "thank you" or "I understand" or "I feel it," or with a simple hug or a smile, the other person says, "That's good," "That's weak," or "That's of no importance." The other person has become a CRITIC. He/she is judging the worth, the effectiveness, or success of the work. Now, no matter how mature, how worldly, how accustomed to criticism one may be, let's face it, any criticism is painful. Leaving aside for the moment the feelings of failure or rejection that may arise in the face of criticism, there is a very subtle issue here that we have to deal with: the critic stands outside the artist's experience and comments verbally upon an essentially non-verbal experience. At the very least, we the recipients of that criticism will have to make a cognitive leap to understand how that utterance could apply to our work. In making that leap, we may feel offended at how disconnected that critic was from our work to be "standing outside or above it." Some of us may refuse to make that leap at all, and may close our ears to all criticism. However, because most of us do want, at least in part, to *know* the specifics of criticism, and because most of us find it virtually impossible to keep our ears closed all the time, we may become subject to destructive situations that seem out of our control.

Judy was a Director of Development for a New England College. She had been planning a fundraising campaign for some time, and as the deadline approached for her mailing, she grew very anxious about the effectiveness of her initial letter. Her approach was more imaginative and more vigorous than those of her predecessors, and she was worried that she was taking a risk not only with the task but also with her very position. The evening before she was to submit a copy of the letter to the President, she was so preoccupied that she forgot to pick the kids up at school. Her husband Jerry, who had been increasingly frustrated by Judy's neglect of domestic duties the past few weeks, had to leave work to get the kids. When they got home, Jerry said something mildly sarcastic to Judy who immediately flew into a rage, accusing Jerry of callousness,

then of selfishness. Afterwards, Judy felt she had overreacted, and, as a kind of peace offering, she gave Jerry the letter to look at. Jerry read the letter and thought he was being perfectly reasonable as he launched into a line-by-line criticism of Judy's syntax, style, and writing voice. When he was finished, he was quite surprised to see tears in Judy's eyes. The next morning, Judy called in sick, weakly asked for an extension, and it was two weeks before Judy could get herself to face that letter again. As she read it over, she thought it wasn't all that bad. She corrected a few words and then on impulse, she submitted the letter to the President who phoned her within the hour to tell her it was exactly what was needed.

Obviously, the circumstances under which Jerry read the letter and the interactions between Judy and Jerry had more to do with Jerry's criticism than the letter itself. Judy's vulnerability prevented her from an awareness of these dynamics—an awareness that might have stopped her from showing the letter to Jerry at just that moment, or that might have helped her take his opinions more in context. If Judy had simply thought about such instances ahead of time, in the absence of this kind of stressful situation in which clarity suffers, she might have had more of a reservoir of experience for soliciting constructive criticism.

We can all remember back to those times our work or our very selves were criticized painfully, simply because the person criticizing was angry with us or competitive or, to put it mildly, just an "insensitive son-of-a-bitch." It's important to learn to distinguish this kind of contaminated criticism from potentially constructive criticism. All things being equal, let's assume that either most critics are reasonable and honest people or that we have just learned to avoid the ones who are not. Comments coming from such reasonable critics will be either enlightening or irrelevant.

Often, criticism says as much if not more about the critic's values and personality as it does about the work itself. Leonardo da Vinci once said, "When someone criticizes our work, we should look more at the person who makes the criticism, how he lives his life, to determine whether that criticism should be listened to." A TV sitcom once portrayed a drama critic who wrote his weekly reviews of plays he had never seen. Of course, this is a caricature of a critic. But we've all heard of critics who feel perfectly justified in reviewing a film or a play after seeing the first or last ten minutes of it, or the art critic who can "evaluate" the canvases while brusquely striding through the gallery

in two minutes flat (and proud of it), or the executives of a toy company who become instant experts of film animation and can turn down a story board between the first and second donut. Sometimes such people have been known to yield to reasonable protest, tactfully and persistently placed. At other times, such attempts are futile and we, the creators, must live on surrounded by what can only be called critical ineptitude. Despite the difficulties that such critical behavior may cause the externals of career, however, there is no reason at all that we should as well become inwardly depressed or offended. Such criticism is simply inappropriate, and whenever possible, should be taken with the same grain of salt that the critic may often take our work.

There are other forms of criticism that, though they may be reasonable and rather well-meaning and even thorough, nevertheless tell us much more about the critic and his/her values than about the work. About twenty years ago, while teaching at SUNY, Purchase, I ran a series of experiments that enabled me to predict, successfully, which art works a given individual would prefer. These predictions were based on the results of two psychological tests administered to the "critics." The first test measured tolerance of complexity. It asked the subject a number of questions having to do with preference for varying degrees of complexity in dealing with a boss, choosing a color-TV, or making a guest list for a party. The second test, for tolerance of ambiguity, measured the subject's willingness to deal with situations that were unclear and risky. There were twenty-five subjects, none of who had ever taken these tests before, but all of who were in the upper classes of a college that prided itself upon its encouragement of originality. Of the twenty-five, there were seven students who scored extremely high on both tolerance of complexity and tolerance of ambiguity. This meant that they had been living their lives (or thought they had been) in such a way as to embrace situations that were extremely complex and ambiguous. Another six students scored very low, interpreting their lives as moving towards simplicity and clarity. The remaining twelve fell somewhere in the middle.

After this test was scored, I showed the students slides of various works of art and asked them to rate them numerically in terms of both their liking for them and the amount of time, in seconds, it took for them to grow bored. The two simultaneous tests were meant to crosscheck the same variable: liking for given works of art. The results were extremely significant, so much so that they seemed almost self-evident and trite. Six of the seven students who scored highest in tolerance of both ambiguity and

complexity also scored highest in their liking for Picasso's Cubist works and Magritte's works. All of the six students who scored at the other end of the ambiguity / complexity scale, scored *lowest* in their liking for Picasso's Cubism and Magritte, and *highest* in their liking for the "neo-Realists."

Although I was pleased that one of the many experiments I designed had actually come out so neatly, I grew a little depressed about what it was I had actually found. My God, I thought, not only is a critic's reaction determined by a fight with his wife, what he ate for breakfast and how quickly he walked around the show, but it was also part and parcel of who he was as a person and what he thought about life in general. There seemed to be an infinite number of determinants to a critic's opinion that were operative even before he was to set eyes upon the given work. Thinking about this, I began to feel a kind of emptiness, as if I had somehow lost something that was important to me. As time went on, I realized that what I had lost was that absolute faith that some of us have in the judgements of those designated by society as the arbiters of taste. Until this time, some kind of an abstract notion of arbiter, a composite of all the teachers, older artists and critics I had experienced, had been hovering above me when I worked. I now began to look at each one of these people as human beings, individuals like me who would sneak into the refrigerator to steal some ice cream when no one was looking, who scratched their hemorrhoids and worried about their weight. Slowly, imperceptibly, a change came over the way I listened to criticism. I was no longer devastated by severely negative criticism, nor, conversely, was I particularly overjoyed when there was high praise.

My initial feeling of loss dissolved in time. What I was losing was the real possibility that I could be powerfully uplifted by praise. I was letting go of a hope, and that's never pleasant. But because the hope was unrealistic, inappropriate, and probably insatiable, the pain of giving it up was more than outweighed by the greater centeredness that came in its wake. For in time, I found myself actually seeking out criticism from people whose opinion I respected. I valued this criticism not because it made me feel good, but because, often enough, it aided me in seeing my work in ways it might have taken me months more to see, ways that clearly helped my development and growth.

And now we come to the value of criticism. Having said so many things about the perversions and ill effects of both destructive and well-intended criticism, it is

important to emphasize that there are many ways that criticism can *nurture* creative work. Simply by really experiencing a work on its own terms, and by addressing it with understanding, even a negative criticism of all or part of the work can communicate to the artist that the critic was indeed connected to the work, bothered to be, wished to be, and that the critic was going to the trouble of criticizing out of concern and a desire to help the artist grow.

How can you best determine if a criticism is valid, addressed to the foundations of the work and should somehow be integrated into our thinking about the work? Conceivably electrodes might be implanted into the brains of everyone watching a performance or staring at a painting, to transmit their brainwaves, heart rate, and rapid pulse, as the performance progressed or as their eyes moved about the painting. Those points at which the vast majority of the audience lost interest or began planning their next day's activities (which might register as "Beta" brain waves), would be the points at which most artists would consider themselves to have been less successful. Most artists, for better or worse, are sensitive enough not to need such diagnostic tools. At a show, many *feel and know* with extraordinary accuracy those points of disconnection with an audience. The only thing they may not know is *why* those points are less effective. This is where criticism is of value. People may be able to say. "I stopped caring what happened to that character" or "The photography grew too dense for me to watch it at that moment" or "The dance movement repeated too much to keep my interest." These are all extremely honest reactions, experiencing and criticizing the work on its own terms. Another kind of criticism is not quite so easy to integrate, and in many ways, is dangerous to the stability of the artist. This is what I call "premise criticism." It takes the form of "What you are doing is not important enough" or "This is not true dance, or art" or "This has been done before" or "This is too depressing" or "This is Un-American" or "Decadent Art" or "retro." The critic stands outside and above the work, because of a discrepancy between his premise and the premise of the artist. If the critic would say just this, there would be no confusion and most likely the artist could, as Leonardo said, "Make as though he had not heard," and go back to his work. Unfortunately, critics often talk as if they speak for a community, a cultural elite, a country, even an entire society.

Such criticism may be confusing for the unworldly artist and may lead him to doubt the legitimacy of his work. Another may withdraw completely from the

professional arena out of fear or anger that his work is being devalued. Or worse, it may lead an artist actually to change a style in the hopes of appeasing what this critic claims to represent.

I've received a number of criticisms of the various stages of manuscript of this book, and I carefully heeded several criticisms that my readers had in common: the points in each chapter at which the reader grew bored, points of confusion, and the relative effectiveness of the exercises. Every once in a while, a reader would offer a particularly vehement criticism of a specific idea or section that just didn't make sense in view of what I had written. If no one else had the same reaction (and often I made a point of double-checking) and, more importantly, I couldn't summon up any ambivalence, I generally let the passage or idea go through untouched. I can't honestly say that I welcome criticism with open arms—I am usually a bit frustrated by it—but *ultimately*, and that's the important thing, I am always grateful for it.

The whole issue of criticism is a thorny one. Every individual will treat it a bit differently. It is most important to be aware of what you feel about your own work, to know what you know about it and what you don't know about it. If you solicit criticism, choose people whose minds and lives you respect, and be aware that though this is just one human being with his/her own tastes, you may very well learn much about your work and about yourself. The more centered you become within yourself, the more fluid and healthy can become the give and take between you and a critic. In the face of unsolicited criticism, consider your opinion of the individual first, and then weigh the value of the individual's views about your work. In most cases, simply thinking through the issues raised in this chapter and carefully sifting through some memories of past criticism may be enough to start you coping more beneficially with it. This would give you the lift you need to solicit more and more of it until you are an "old hand" like me, pompously telling others how to cope.

C. COMPETITION

BECAUSE AN ARTIST IS MERELY A LINK IN A CHAIN of creation extending far back through time, he has the opportunity to connect to and feel a close part of the ideas and forms of both his contemporaries and his predecessors. On the other hand, it is a rare artist who

maintains continuous and intense exposure to contemporary art. Sometimes, during peak periods of creativity, the artist has no wish for any input, especially input that might interfere with his creative flow. It is as if another's work is a kind of Siren voice crying, "Do it my way!" or "I've already tried that!"

Everyone will find his/her own level of need for this kind of exposure. One should keep in mind, however, that resistance to seeing work, as distinct from those times of self-involvement caused by creative periods, may be due to defensive hostility and competitiveness.

The whole issue of competition is a difficult one for most creative people. The scene in a Milanese Town Hall, with Leonardo on the left, Michelangelo on the right, each silently and stubbornly trying to out-paint the other, is merely one of the more obvious historical manifestations of the competitive hostility to which artists are prone. We can also visualize Sophocles storming out of the Amphitheatre at Epidaurus when he heard that the young erratic upstart Euripides had beaten him in the competition by writing a play about common people. Or we can see Clara Schumann and Brahms vigorously attacking the anarchy of Wagner's works, Goethe screaming to his wife that Schiller was going to pull German literature back into the suicide of Romanticism, Gaughin raging to Van Gogh that Seurat's obsession with scientific control was deadly to painting. The basic problem, of course, is that the difficulty of artistic survival in societies with limited patronage has *always* led to competition among artists. Journals of well-known creative artists as well as contemporary clinical studies have shown that many people who identify themselves as "creative" at an early age, feel in some ways estranged from childhood circles with their competitive give and take. It's important to notice the behavior and games of little boys in all societies, from the more obvious examples of physical fighting and sports to the more subtle forms of verbal mocking, all of which tend to help the boy develop into an adult male who can "take it." And now, with the emergence of women's equal rights, come for better or worse the equal opportunity of girls to participate in competitive behavior.

Those children who exist somewhat apart from this competitive give and take, may grow to adulthood without learning relaxed responses to competition. When they emerge into the professional artistic world after school, they suddenly run head-on into rejection, humiliation, and the kind of very painful head-butting against which they are much too vulnerable. If there is anything I've learned in years of teaching in college art

departments, it's that there is a devastating lack of preparation given for what the young aspiring creative person will *really* go through upon leaving school.

When I was still an undergraduate student at Cornell, Jacques Lipschitz came to speak to the hopeful art students. We all expected to be told how beautiful it was going to be out there, how meaningful life could be for an artist, how wonderful it would be to wake up every morning to create. After all, Lipschitz had gone from country to country, had lived through years of poverty, deprivation, danger, and recently had begun to work again after suffering the total destruction through fire of his entire studio. As I remember back forty years to what he told us, a single thought stands out. Yes, he told us how important it was really to work, always to work, despite whatever happened (all great artists have seemed to say that). But what stands out to this day, what caused a sensation then, was when one of the best art students in the department, Dyrirk, asked him what he had to tell the graduating class about the art world they would soon enter. Lipschitz paused, looked at our art professor with his sad eyes, and said, "If you must understand one thing, you must understand that there are more than 100,000 people in New York who think of themselves as artists and less than 100, LESS THAN 100, can make a real living at it. And after awhile, if you can't make a living at it, how much time do you think you can put into it."

No one had ever said anything like that before to us. And these were the years of great expectations, the Kennedy Years, when absolutely everything was possible, when action paintings were being sold for \$20,000, when the National Endowment for the Arts was being created. Now, as I look back to those years as an undergraduate and graduate student, I pass through the faces of all those hopeful students, literally hundreds of them, and I can't think of more than ten who I know are still practicing, really practicing their art form. That's less than 2%. The alumni reviews are filled with glowing reports of newly elected bank presidents, department chairmen, and even film studio administrators and museum directors, but as my contemporaries move further and further back in the Class Years, there are fewer and fewer reports of sustained creative work much less achievement. There are many reasons for this, of course, having to do with a steadily worsening economy and a societal de-emphasis on creative frills, but what stand out for me now is the sad look in Lipschitz's eyes and the shock we all felt when he spoke as he did. Why were we shocked, and why are so many of our young artists so shocked and UNPREPARED when they try to survive in the world

as creative people?! There are courses in everything from water-color painting to Medieval Art History to Digital Media in our Art Schools, from Sophocles to Performance Studies in our Theater Departments, but where is a single course on "The Artist in Society?" Where are our young people prepared to persist through years of humiliating rejections at acting auditions, to push through ill-mannered secretaries to the gallery owner with those little packages of slides, to send a manuscript off to twenty-five publishers, have it rejected *by all twenty-five*, and still keep writing that next one? It seems a symptom of the educational establishment's own insecurities about its survival, that they stick their heads in the sand, leaving aspiring creative people to get this vital information, if at all, from those peers who straddle both worlds, of school and society. But it is unfortunately true that the sudden emergence of the young creative person into the world causes many of the best of them to withdraw from the competitive arena in fear or resignation. And associated with such a withdrawal may be the refusal to admit the validity of another live (and potentially competing) artist's work.

How does one gain the competitive strength needed to persist in the professional arena? First of all, there are the many different kinds of support groups, from the informal gatherings of friends and associates over coffee, through the more formal meetings of professional peers or therapy groups which focus on such things as assertiveness training and the recognition of competitive striving. In metropolitan areas, there tend of course to be quite a bit more opportunities for such things, but this just means that individuals further away from centers must seek out these groups a little more energetically. It would be extremely helpful if these groups, as informal gatherings or even accredited classes, were organized in the schools themselves.

Another means of gaining personal strength is by opening oneself to all the feeling of rivalry and competitive anger that have been repressed over the years--and by doing so alone, creatively, in much the manner one has worked at one's art form. This is done simply by writing private dialogues with one's imagined competitors, past, present, or even imaginary. Remember, these writings are for you alone, so there should be no inhibitions. Once expressed in this way, hostile feelings become more manageable, and one can slowly begin to open to the work, ideas, and feelings of other artists and peers. This is not only stimulating and sustaining, but it can lead to a feeling of being part of something larger and more various than oneself. And isn't this the

most important issue: that unexpressed competitive feelings not only hinder your attempts at survival, at the development of your art form and your career, but they can prevent you from the really sustaining feelings of belonging?

At the same time that you find ways of understanding and expressing your feelings of competition, you may find it helpful to open yourself slowly to the works of others. You might even feel it very pleasant. For those of you who are a bit reticent, there are a number of transitional steps. Like many creative people, I personally find it easiest to appreciate the works of artists long since dead. The appreciation of such work reinforces our feeling of togetherness as artists, anchors us in an age-old tradition while temporarily avoiding feelings of competition towards our contemporaries. Especially exciting is the *discovery* of the works of deceased artists who have remained in relative obscurity. Such discovery parallels that of the art historian and anthropologist and may be creatively inspiring. Bringing this discovery into the world, if only by showing it to a few respected friends and colleagues, involves a process of sharing that is similar to the exhibition of art. Integrating the discovery and appreciation of this work into your own art is a highly developed form of collaboration. One can only bring forth an image of Van Gogh lovingly tacking a Hiroshige print onto his wall, and then trying to catch the same movement of the waves, or of Mendelssohn refusing to leave the office of the Concertmeister until he agreed to the performance of Bach's work, of Philip Roth's championing the Penguin publication of East European writers.

The next step would be for you to look at the work of a close friend, and in turn to show him your work. Then, if you're lucky enough to find an artists' group in your area, by all means try it out. Finally, in the company of a good friend, attend gallery shows, dance concerts, new plays. The risk of competitive feelings is reduced by sharing.

There is another path. A dancer might go to a show of paintings, then an abstract film and finally to a dance performance by another company. Taken gradually, these steps lead you in less abrupt, less threatening ways towards the appreciation of the work of your colleagues. One side benefit could very well be the tremendous stimulation gained from other art forms. There are ideas and feelings that are common to all art forms and one medium can inspire another. Paul Klee's love of music, Arnold Schonberg's paintings, Picasso's play, and Cocteau's drawings and films are wonderful

examples of this. Indeed, this may open up an entirely different area of creativity, one that encourages you to begin to play in another art form without pressure.

D. SURVIVAL

THERE ARE AN INFINITE VARIETY OF SURVIVAL OPTIONS open to creative people in today's world. Some, like Bill in New York, and Marc in Boston, maintained full-time commitments to careers that remained separate from their particular art forms. Bill was a playwright who had worked for years as a counselor for alcoholics. It was a check coming in every week, but it also gave Bill a feeling of helping and of being in contact with others. Writing is a very solitary activity, and counseling gave Bill a chance to connect to a world larger than his small studio. Marc is a painter who enjoyed construction work because it allowed him to work with his hands, alongside a few friends who work on the jobs with him. The pay was quite good for short periods of time, permitting Marc to return often to the concentrated work of painting. For a short while in the 70s, my wife and I ran a little home bakery at the same time that I was making films. I enjoyed the actual cooking, the inventing of new recipes, and I looked forward to making the runs around New England, talking with managers of food shops. And in a very unique way, I think that the process of cooking mirrored and stimulated the integration of the various elements of making my films at that time. History is filled with positive examples of creative folks who were trained and who excelled at work other than their creative art form. Rimsky-Korsakov and Chekov were physicians, William Carlos Williams a dentist, and Zola a biologist. Kafka worked at an insurance company, and Charles Ives ran a very successful business.

In each of our cases, survival work unrelated to our art forms gave us not only economic support but also added to our lives those elements that may have been lacking in pure creative activity: interaction with people and the feeling of belonging to everyday existence. On the other hand, the difficulty exists that in such circumstances, we confront our art form at the end of a hard day or on the weekends, and for many of us, this proves just not enough. It was far easier, sometimes when coming home from a long day driving those apple strudels around Vermont, for me to fall asleep in front of the tube. It takes an extremely disciplined creator willfully to clear his/her mind of the

day's activities and get down to work. In fact, this problem is faced by many people who do not consider themselves professional artists but who, having worked for awhile at noncreative jobs, want to begin to paint or write or play a recorder when they have free time. Although it may be quite easy and exciting for these people to begin, it proves more difficult to sustain the interest once the initial enthusiasm of a new interest subsides. I cover a number of warm-up exercises in the APPENDIX, and Chapter Four includes an extended discussion on starting work.

Not all of us can carry on this kind of duality in our lives for long without giving way to either an end to our creativity or some kind of integration of our art and our survival work. Bill seemed to be the type of person who could go back and forth between the two spheres. Marc and I, on the other hand, eventually chose to pursue survival work that was a bit closer to our art form. Marc is now a Professor of Art at a New England College, and I have been teaching film animation to small children throughout the world as well as to my students at Dartmouth. Such solutions have the benefit of a much more direct relationship with the artist's primary interest, thereby offering support to the artistic identity at the same time that they may better ensure a measure of success at the survival job. On the other hand, such jobs can be insidious. Success, achievement, and rising in position and salary at the job may occur more often than parallel successes within the artistic identity. Many artists find themselves putting more and more time and energy into their sustaining jobs until they are only speaking of what they will do "once the next vacation rolls around." Also, an artist who teaches may find that so much talking about art tends to diffuse the need actually to create it. As we saw with Jim in the first chapter, and as I discuss in the "Hot Air" chapter, talking prematurely about one's own work, or even about principles associated with one's work, may tend to weaken the creation of that work.

Some artists try to avoid the pitfalls by serving as their own patron. They work full-time for limited periods, building up a reserve of funds, then leave the job to pursue their art until the money begins to run out. This solution does offer a cleaner separation between church and state, allowing full commitment to the job, then full commitment to personal creation. In hard economic times, however, it can be tough finding a job at the moment cash flow is down, and worrying about money, and about finding that job, can begin to eat into the creative time well before it is due to end by design.

The best solutions are often the most creative ones, simply because no one has yet thought of them and the competition within a given area has not yet emerged. For example, a sculptor, Don, began to teach painting classes in a Vermont Nursing Home. At first he did it for free, but after a year of doing that, sculpting, and earning money by cleaning houses, he decided to approach the State Arts Council to get his teaching funded in some way. After diligent and *persevering* activity, he finally managed to initiate funding slots within the Council budget. Six years later, he was relatively secure, being paid to work about a third of the year in nursing homes, on his own schedule. He's also found that the work of the aged inspires his own work. And this is an extremely important point—the best solutions not only do not detract from creative work, but may well add to it in meaningful ways. Because our society does not often value such integration, there are few such opportunities available for the asking. It is then up to the individual artist to create his own concept of meaningful survival work and to find a way to get it funded or to find an employer who finds it as meaningful to his/her business as you do. This will not be easy, but the best things rarely are.

In highly unique situations, a creator may find a job that allows, even encourages him, to create precisely the kind of work he might do if working independently. Classical examples would include a commission for Mozart to write a mass, for Michelangelo to paint a Sistine Chapel ceiling, for Descartes to lie in his bed in Sweden and simply to think. In contemporary times, a filmmaker may have received a once-in-a-lifetime AFI (American Film Institute) grant to complete an independent film, a painter may get an NEA grant to complete a series of paintings, an author may get an unusually large advance to complete a fiction work, a scientist may gain two years of pure research through a National Science Foundation Grant. Such cases are not the rule, however, with grants and commissions running about one for every 30-100 applicants. With the present trend of budget cuts, such opportunities will actually decrease (The AFI grants were stopped ten years ago). Such opportunities, though wonderful while they last, are usually but a temporary respite. People who get "hooked" on such things spend inordinate amounts of time ferreting out little-known grants, making their contacts, and even adapting their work to what they think a selection committee is seeking. This may work for some individuals, who with a lot of luck and help from their friends, can persist on grants for a number of years. It may not work for other people who may gradually lose contact with their creative center and

grow dependent upon others' opinions of their work and vulnerable to consequent work blocks and creative detours. As I will discuss later in the Chapter on Work Blocks, staying in touch with one's creative center is the best way to prevent blocks.

A creator may find his art can earn him a living that is dependable and lasting. A filmmaker may find that he loves to design commercial spots for Levis, a painter may find that he loves to paint greeting card illustrations, a playwright may find that he loves to write *The Sopranos* scripts, a scientist may find that he loves inventing laser weapons for the Pentagon. The key is that most creative work that is dependably saleable is that which is made-to-order or made-to-fit the tastes and needs of the prevailing social establishments. The positive aspects of this commercial solution have to do with money, security, a greater feeling of belonging, and applause from one's superiors and often from the public (though more often, the artist is anonymous, an extension of the commercial enterprise from which he draws his rewards). The negative aspects are terribly obvious. First of all, how many people can honestly and smoothly fit themselves into such molds? Even if one could fit oneself in, there is very little that is permanent and secure. Levis may go with another studio, postal rates may increase so much that the greeting card industry goes down, *The Sopranos* will go off the air someday, and a democrat in the White House may later ask for a freeze in new weapons research. These seemingly dependable jobs are nevertheless high-risk areas for ulcers, so one is still not out of the woods if security is the highest priority.

In the category of survival, "spouse" should be included. A husband or wife may work at a regular job, supporting the other to stay at home, both to create and to keep the house. The artist/homemaker, who may be either a male or a female, cleans the house, cooks, shops, and takes care of the children. John Lennon and, to an even more successful extent, Paul Klee, were notable examples of the male homemaker. However, children may not allow such clean delineations of time and space for personal work, and it is the rare father or mother who can effectively carry out both roles. Paul Klee was successful at both primarily because his focus upon little Felix was allowed to bleed into and inspire his deceptively childlike artwork. Similarly, cooking, as a creatively improvisational activity, seems to integrate wonderfully with all creative forms, both as a ritualistic prelude to work, and as a relief from it. Notwithstanding the problems and end of our little home bakery, I still enjoy improvisational cooking while I'm working on a film or editing this book. Of course, I'm not in the same league as

Rossini, who enjoyed cooking (and eating) his pasta dishes so much that he had no more time or desire for opera composition.

Within these categories, there are a multitude of variations. You may have already found that you can adapt well to some of them, or that you are having a terribly difficult time adapting to any one of them. More than likely, for this is true for most creative people, you will spend the early part of your life trying first one option then another, finally settling on one solution for a period of time. Then at some later point, which may also coincide with a time of crisis, you may feel that the present solution is no longer workable. This is then the time to become aware of the multitude of options.

The most important thing to consider is that *no* survival strategy is perfect. Nothing is permanent. Options that do not work out are not failures, but rather additional information about oneself and one's relationship to the world. Think of all the great creators throughout history who have worked out adaptations with great pain. Today, there are so many more survival opportunities than in the past.

CHAPTER 2

WHERE AND HOW

ALTHOUGH THERE IS NO SINGLE “IDEAL” LIFESTYLE that would fit everyone, your choice of life style can influence the effectiveness and fulfillment of your creative processes. Each of us, at various points in our lives, makes clear choices, unwittingly or not, to live in the city or the country, to live alone or with another person, and to work alone or collaboratively. We organize our visual space and, to some extent, choose or at least accept the sounds around us. This chapter attempts to define the issues involved in various lifestyles and their relationship to creative work.

A. CITY LIFE

YOU WAKE UP ENERGETICALLY, HOPING to get back to that poem, or painting, but the morning mail features two rejection letters and a series of overdue bills. You suddenly feel like going back to bed, followed by that recurrent thought, maybe you should have gone to law school. You live in the big city, however, and you do not have to go back to bed. You get dressed and go shopping, or to a museum, or to one of hundreds of movie theaters. Or you go for a long walk, looking at all the people passing by, the store windows, the graffiti on the walls, the designs on the manhole covers, the new construction site going up down the block, the police cars surrounding the tenement building. You may stop to visit a friend, or just chat with the owner of the bar who is sweeping his walk. After awhile, you feel better, you feel part of the world again. A jolt of energy rises to your shoulders, and you are ready to return to your studio to begin work. The bills can wait and the rejection notices can be filed in the wastepaper basket.

You are a city artist. You've chosen this and for better or worse, you're satisfied with it. Maybe later tonight, you'll go to an opening of a new gallery show, see some friends, make some contacts, and then go out for a drink with a few colleagues and talk about your work. It's expensive to live these days, and you have to work a little harder at survival jobs to stay in the center of things. But "this is where it's at," and there isn't much choice if you want to be a serious artist, or writer, or dancer, or filmmaker. Maybe this summer you'll get a place in the country for a few weeks to "clear your head out," but for now, you've got it together here.

People who *choose* the city as a place in which to live and work feel that its most positive aspects are the chance for professional growth through stimulation and day-to-day contacts with others in their field. Creative people often grow up feeling somewhat estranged from the normal currents of human life, and at least in the city, there is more opportunity to feel part of an artistic and intellectual community. Although artists living in rural areas have been known to make it in the art world, most of these individuals first made it in the city, then moved to the country, while maintaining their city contacts. Clearly, the inside track for professional success is found in the city. It is unfortunately true that many granting institutions and most cultural organizations regard country dwellers as "regional artists" a bit outside the mainstream of culture and hence, in some way inferior.

For those of you who want to utilize the city in new, more stimulating ways, and for those of you in the country who are planning a move to the city, here are some activities that are unique to the city. They should make its pollution, tensions, and insanities a bit more tolerable.

- 1) Find out where the fruit, vegetables, flowers, and fish come into your city to be distributed to the various merchants. Arrive there by 6 a.m., equipped with a camera, a sketch pad, a tape-recorder, or just your eyes and ears, and be prepared to spend a few hours taking in the entire experience.
- 2) Ride public transportation: buses, subways, ferries, streetcars, or gondolas back and forth, up and down, for a few hours, just watching the people and reading the advertisements and graffiti on the walls.

- 3) If you've lived at various addresses in the city over the years, take a little walking tour of the old neighborhoods. Buy some groceries in the old store, walk up the stairs of the old apartment, sit on the steps for a while. If you're feeling especially social, pay a little visit to the old super. Remember what it was like to live there, who you were at the time, your thoughts and feelings. Buy a little pad in the old store, and, while sitting on the steps of your old apartment, make some notes on these memories. Write a letter to the person you once were—or a letter from that person to yourself now.
- 4) Go to the ethnic neighborhoods of your city. Have a meal and listen to the tones of the language. Compare the accents when different groups speak English. Study the coloring, the eyes, and the faces. Try to get a feeling for the difference in rhythm of the various neighborhoods. Imagine what it might be like to live in that country.
- 6) Find the zoo in your city and take in all the animals as well as the people visiting the animals. Tape, film, photograph, draw, or take notes on the animals and the people. Choose one animal you feel may be a compelling totem for you. Imagine what it must be like for that animal to be in the zoo, being watched by you, and what it might have been like in the wild. Listen to its voice, watch its facial and body expressions, and try to understand what it is communicating.
- 7) If you have access to the roof of your city dwelling, create a tiny environment that belies the existence of the city below. In a little trough, plant flowers or vegetables. Watch them grow from seedlings, and care for them every day.
- 8) Ironically, one of the most rewarding aspects of city life is taking a vacation in the country. All the negative side effects of the city—unhealthy bodies, lungs, pale faces, tiredness, nervous tension, bitterness, aggression, and depression—fall away at the beach or the mountains. You can feel the difference in the air and see it in people's faces. You may be relaxed enough to work on your vacation or you may just re-center yourself to feel that when you return your work can take a more vigorous, truer thrust.

B. COUNTRY LIFE

YOU'RE IN THE MIDDLE OF A POEM or painting again. You wake up with those two rejection letters and nostalgia for law school. This time, however, you're living in the country. You leave everything just as it is in the studio, step outside into the sun, take a few deep breaths of mountain air, and watch a hummingbird dart in and out of the lilies. Then you take a long walk in the woods, picking berries, and lie down at last by a stream, turn over to watch the clouds dissolve, then fall asleep in the warm sun. After a little while, you awaken and walk back to your studio to resume work.

This idyllic fantasy conceals a number of problems. Here is a worst-case scenario, one unfortunately that is sometimes more fact than fiction: Big-city immigrants decide to enliven the country scene with the "serious work" of the city from which they escaped. These people wreak havoc in school board meetings, community cultural organizations, and rural college art departments. With the strength of their ever-increasing numbers, they tend to prevail in making minor-league bastions of culture out of what were once calm, rather pleasant country towns. In absolutely no time at all, these immigrants have turned that town into a vigorous, concrete-covered, tension-laden, political extravaganza—lacking only the quality cultural institutions and the presence of serious artists to justify its excesses. These *nouveau rustica* demand big-city services along with their return to the simple life, the consequences of which are large deforested rural housing developments, soil erosion, air pollution from not only the industry escorted into the state (to pay for the services) but also from the too numerous wood stoves burning in depressed valleys. Industrial wastes and overworked septic systems seep into the water supply and shopping centers sprout up like weeds throughout the countryside.

What is life like for the artist? It is clearly easier, less expensive to live in the country. On the other hand, unless you happen to be a VW mechanic, there are fewer survival jobs at lower pay. The problems of survival loom just as large as in the city.

Without the city's competitive edge, the artist dissipates his energies in rural pursuits—in house restoring, car maintenance, gardening, long trips to see various friends—until he finds himself spending less time and energy on his art than he did in

the city. The two rejection letters, which indeed could be assuaged by a walk, can as easily generate feelings of inferiority, threat, failure, and aloneness. Those who try to maintain the same “big-city” standards of excellence, experience a separation from the “scene,” and they soon find themselves either repeating past efforts or going off into realms far afield. Choosing to “get away from it all” implies that the artist charts his own course unimpeded by the external pressures of the city. But these external pressures stimulate and excite as much as they impede.

Those artists most satisfied with the country have *first* entrenched themselves in a big-city scene. They return to their circles periodically for a jolt of energy much as they originally may have visited the country for a touch of peace. They have managed a kind of polar existence, straddling the two worlds.

Other artists are so centered that they can move to the country, enter into its atmosphere, gain sustenance, and create with no other source of inspiration than nature and their own momentum. In the city, they did not take advantage of its opportunities. They worked alone, finding their own path. They continue to do so in the country, which is an environment that is highly conducive to such a style. They work, mindful only of their own growth. They make friends with farmers and game wardens as easily as with businessmen and shopkeepers in the city. They find ways to survive.

Here are some activities open to those who come to the country—not those who bring their inner problems with them to superimpose upon a new environment, but those who truly will benefit from and add to the country around them.

- 1) Walking can be a regular prelude to creative work. Some artists live a mile or two from the studio so that they have an excuse to walk to work every day. The walk gives them an opportunity for the gradual transition between daily living and the kind of meditative reverie of creative work. Some may carry sketchbooks and stop at a favorite place along the way. If you are working very hard at a piece and don't have the strength or will to finish it, walk further and further each day, and push yourself beyond your limits to the point of the “second wind.” This physical reinforcement of confidence and will carries over to the psychic sphere. If you find yourself stuck creatively, take a new route home from your studio. Avoid your favorite pathway. It may lead to a new direction in creative work.

2) Gardening is tremendously calming, a good respite from the tensions of creative work. It can also be a highly creative endeavor, choosing which seed to plant next to another seed, planning the most effective growth as well as the most beautiful garden. Begin a garden at the same time that you begin an extended project, and nurture the garden to its fruition. Pulling weeds may remind you of clearing away stifling details. Watering the garden is like nurturing your own work.

3) Some of the finest creators throughout history have been beekeepers. Virgil, Maeterlinck, and Tolstoy even wrote books about their hobbies. Beekeeping can be done as a complementary part of gardening. Anyone can learn about the care of the hive in a week or so. Bees are in constant communication with the entire flower and tree population, and by being in close touch with a hive, a beekeeper keeps in close touch with all of Nature. I've been able to sit for entire mornings, watching the bees come and go, and I always came away refreshed, more centered and able to go about the creative tasks I had set myself.

4) In my wife's native Czechoslovakia, mushroom searching is a national sport. On a Sunday, whole families spread out through the forest, with each person calling out when he has found an edible mushroom. It is exhilarating to find such mushrooms because they blend in so well with twigs and tree trunks and the surrounding area. To be successful, you must concentrate completely upon the earth, walking steadily forwards, eyes circling the area. With practice, you begin to think like a mushroom. You can walk right into a strange forest and head straight to a particular area knowing that five or six mushrooms will be there. Thinking like a mushroom, concentrating fully with the eyes and sense of smell, leads to communion with nature and with our deepest selves. Mushroom searching can also aid us in the gathering of materials for a collage, a found-object construction, a compilation film, and random found-sound.

C. INDIVIDUAL VS COLLABORATIVE WORK

IN THE PERFORMING ARTS, ARTISTS CREATE and perform works *as a group*. Other art forms, such as the visual arts, writing, the composition of music, and some forms of filmmaking, are traditionally more solitary creative activities. The artist may move all the way to the completion of the artwork without interacting with other human beings. Clearly, some art forms are more social than others. The initial choice of art form entails another choice: how alone do you want to be in the act of creation?

Sometimes an artist chooses a form at an early age, and later is dissatisfied with the consequences. Visual artists may be quite fulfilled creating paintings, sculpture, or films in solitude, but some of these same artists, as they grow older, may crave company, and so might move towards full-time teaching, art therapy, or performance art. Poets may later choose to try playwriting within a theater group. Our needs change at different stages of our lives. Refusing to heed the force of these needs can bring blocks, exhaustion, or just plain boredom.

George, a New York writer who had always worked alone, found himself spending too much time walking the streets at night, and too much time on the telephone. He became tense and irritable when alone at the computer. Understanding his growing need for community, George chose to join the New York Writer's Room, a place where he could write in the company of other writers. There he found both sensitivity to privacy and the availability of support when needed.

Financial reasons sometimes impel visual artists to share a loft; the environment, with clearly defined but contiguous spaces, also offers a much-needed support system.

You may also experiment with joint or collaborative creation. Such possibilities usually arise because two artists have grown to love and respect each other's work and feel both supported and stimulated in the company of the other. The strength of their connection can withstand the strains of collaboration, and newer, different work can grow between them.

The results of collaborations can be successful or disastrous. Collaborators must remain open to each other throughout the experience, not cover up hostility under the guise of "professional behavior." And they should not begin collaboration by tying it to survival issues. In other words, two writers who collaborate on a book should not also depend for their survival upon the advance for that book, because then it might be impossible to back off from a project that has come to endanger their friendship. Begin

collaboration out of an easy sense of fun and camaraderie, and then allow it to emerge organically, taking its own unpredictable course.

Most of the examples discussed here have been in the direction of greater social integration. You may feel that you need to move in the opposite direction for a while. John, a musician who had previously enjoyed playing in a group of friends, felt the need to compose, but was uncomfortable with the thought of giving up his companions. He put off making a decision and became depressed. This began to affect both his relationship and his performance with the group, so he tried harder to make his collaboration work. This in turn made him irritable. He entered a collision course, setting up a series of provocations, and in the end, the group made the decision for him, asking him to leave. Feeling rejected both personally and artistically, though he now had time and space for composition, he was too unhappy to take advantage of it. He should have been paying attention to his needs right along. He could have asked the group for time-off to try his hand at composing. It might have fit in with a much-needed vacation for everyone. Or perhaps someone else could have filled in for six months; after that, everyone could then have reworked the next stage.

What seems to cause the most difficulty is the unfortunate notion that a decision is permanent and irretrievable. If this were truly the case, *all* decisions would be put off until the dawning of certainty. Most artists make a number of moves throughout their lives. The ability to see life and work as a process makes it much easier to move in confidence and strength.

D. WHAT YOU SEE

LEONARDO ONCE WROTE, "IF ANYONE WISHES to see how the soul dwells in its body, let him observe how this body uses its daily environment. That is to say, if this is devoid of order and confused, the body will be kept in disorder and confusion by its soul." Leonardo was one of the first Western thinkers to understand the principle of isomorphism—that for example, the structure of one's home or studio might mirror the structure of one's mind. Some of those thousands of rituals artists perform prior to work might be not so much procrastination as a rehearsal for the *structure* of an artistic act to follow. An obsessive concern with throwing out all the old food in the fridge

might have more to do with the editing or pruning of a film, a book, or a musical composition. Working out this process on a less charged level such as the fridge may be just the right transitional step. It's easy to judge the fridge; once established as critic and "pruner," it's possible to tackle the more primary reality of an artwork.

Another artist may find it necessary every week to reorganize his studio or even his home. It might seem to others that this is counterproductive, but it may well be that this artist, in rearranging various elements of furniture and possessions, is coming to terms with his life and deciding which values will predominate at this stage of his work. It may even be an unconscious sifting through of older materials and works, which culminates, just as unconsciously, in the artist uncovering a material or a sketch that has a bearing on the artwork at hand.

A writer who sharpens fifty pencils every morning before writing may be sharpening his wits at the same time. Another writer who cleans her typewriter every morning may be cleaning the cobwebs from her brain at the same time. Someone who spends inordinate amounts of time moving a word processor closer and further away from a window may be working through on a material level, just how internally or externally she shall be writing that day.

Organizing and reorganizing visual space can be extremely important on many levels. It is always best to follow what one feels is right. There does not seem to be a great benefit in analyzing such rituals unless or until they become repetition compulsions *that do not lead to creative work*. For example, an artist who continually fixes up his loft to be able to paint in just the right atmosphere, and in so doing avoids the painting, is substituting the less threatening ritual for the anxiety-laden creative act. The prelude has turned into the performance.

It may be that this artist really needs, deep down, to be a loft-builder and decorator, and because of the lower status accorded such an endeavor, he must perceive his pleasurable loft building as just a prelude to "the more important work of painting." This artist's task then becomes not to analyze the fear of painting, but to understand his guilt for the enjoyment of loft building.

A woman who constantly arranges flowers throughout her rooms so that there is not time to write may either be stuck on a ritual that is not enough to carry her through to her writing, or really happiest at flower-arranging and not courageous enough to admit it to herself. In each case, being in touch with what we really want to do, as

separate from what we think our friends, family, teachers, or society want us to do, would be the key. In general, no matter how absurd or meaningless an environmental ritual is, despite the laughter or irritation of those we live with, if that ritual eventually proceeds to work with which we are happy, it is a *positive ritual*, and we should try not to disturb it.

Let's go to the other extreme—the artist whose environment in its disorder and confusion would send Leonardo flying. Chances are, if this person is working to capacity, is fulfilled and satisfied with his productivity, the disorder is quite "in order" *for that artist*. He may have come to terms with overprotective or overmanipulative parents within him by a rebellion against his environment, and this minor rebellion may have served for a long time as one of the power mechanisms of his creative drive. If this person is working well, and if cohabitation with a mate has been mutually worked out, there is no problem. If, on the other hand, the artist can never find things when he wants them, and if the confusion of his environment mirrors confusion in his creative work, then there is a real problem to be confronted. The disorder and confusion may be utilized here as the smokescreen behind which he hides the anxieties about creating. The artist might try to confront the problem directly by creating a work, openly expressive of chaos, disorder, and confusion. Treating the smokescreen as the thing-in-itself, he might very well dissipate it as a force by resolving it within the artwork.

There has been much work done on the psychology of color. Large corporations very carefully choose the colors of their offices with an eye to the greatest influence upon the efficiency of their employees. Soft blues create a restful environment, yellow creates a feeling of joy, green creates growth and stability, orange-reds, assertiveness, and violets, a fragile sensitivity. Such correlations are statistically valid for large populations of test subjects. However, in many instances, the room colors may just happen to be the ones that last tenant slapped onto the wall, or perhaps they were on sale at the hardware store. On the other hand, a number of artists carefully design their own space, or have professionals design it, to make the area an extension of their own identity.

Most creative people fall somewhere between these two extremes, spending some time and energy at the initiation of a living space. They design an environment that feels right, within the limitations of furniture and possessions they may already

have, and within a fixed budget. This first environment may be the permanent one, or they may change it from time to time to match their personal and artistic growth, or the change in their bank account. Generally speaking, unless you become blocked, there is no reason to bother analyzing why you choose to have your space set up in a certain way. But in the presence of such a block, it often helps to think a little bit about your surroundings. What proportion of your space is allotted to the activity *you say* is primary to you? If most of your space is filled with color TV's, stereo's, wine bottles and waterbeds that have no real connection to your work, then you can see that you've already made a choice in your life for comfort and possessions over the hard work of creating. Seeing that may bring you to a more conscious, honest choice for your lifestyle.

Now, suppose we look into ourselves, see that we have given comfort and pleasure priority over hard work, and we want to go back on our choice. Suppose we manipulate the environment by substituting a hard mattress for the waterbed, and exchange our French wine for enough yoghurt to feed us for a year? Will this have any effect on our work? This would seem to be an exceptionally good start. However, it may be that the waterbed helps a particular artist to envision in reverie his next piece, or that only a perfectly expensive stereo system calms him down after the nervous exhaustion of creation. The litmus test is work. If the artist is working well, it probably doesn't matter if his environment looks like a harem room. But if there is blockage, and if the artist really does wish and choose to work more productively, he must begin to experiment with changes in his environment.

E. WHAT YOU HEAR

I'VE LIVED IN THE MOUNTAINS FOR TWENTY YEARS now, and I wait to hear the birds in the morning before I begin work. When I travel to European cities, or visit friends in New York, the sound of cars keeps me up at night and interrupts my concentration during the day. A good friend simply cannot sleep here in the silence, but requires the sounds of cars outside for sleep and work. My films often deal with weightless movement in space, and I've chosen an environment in which the sounds are

consonant. My friend writes plays and stories about city life, and the tension and heavy metal clanging through a New York City window are just right for him.

Even when I lived in New York, I felt at odds with the environment, going to sleep against recordings of ocean waves. When I began to understand more of what my needs were, I moved to the Vermont mountains. My friend, on the other hand, had first lived in a New Jersey suburb, and he finally moved to New York to bring his environment into synchronization with who he was.

Nature's sounds are predictable. The birds begin to sing all at once at sunrise. Crickets drone continuously for the rest of the day, punctuated by the barking of dogs at 8 a.m. and 5:50 p.m., when people go to and from their jobs by car. Everything quiets down in the evening. The crickets and wind drop a blanket of white sound over everything that soon disappears from consciousness. This white sound has been here for thousands of years and will probably remain for many more. It reinforces the sense of inevitability in the presence of nature, the feeling of being a minor actor in an epic drama. The sounds of the city are grandiose. They attempt to drown out natural sound. Horns blare, radios shriek, subways rumble, and sirens add a touch of surrealism to the city's symphony. It is a fantastic presumption that is, in many ways, the energy behind much of contemporary art. So it is entirely appropriate that an artist choose the sounds of the city and pit the power and "audile volume" of his art against the blaring horns and screeching sirens below. Those who thrive upon these sounds should bless the existence of Metropolitan areas. Others who find themselves constructing elaborate soundproofing, using white sound, or paying extravagant rents for twenty-fifth floor studios, should ask themselves if it wouldn't be more appropriate to live in a pastoral setting.

Regardless of where you live, there is no reason you cannot hear the sounds that make you feel most creative. You may even think seriously about the solution of a writer who is bombarded continuously by the single phrase of his parrot, "You're a genius. . .you're a genius. . .you're a genius."

F. WHEN YOU WORK

MOST OF THE PRELIMINARY EXERCISES, from yoga to TV, were aimed at calming the spirit. However, some people must induce other states of mind in order best to create—conditions destructive to themselves and to those around them. Writers especially seem to need anger, although painters and sculptors also use that emotion. While it seems that rage gives body and spirit to the work, in fact, anger is directed primarily inwards against the fears and anxieties of creating. Because such externalizations are for the most part unconscious, the anger is directed against proxies such as friends, family, critics, publishers and gallery owners, or against “the art establishment,” the government, industry, the military, or society. When drugs and alcohol are added, the results can be devastating for the artist's relationships with friends, family, and professional connections.

If anger has been used regularly as a stimulant, the artist may fear that analysis and dissipation of rage will leave him unmotivated and spiritless. Even if this were true, anger endangers personal and professional relationships, which can in turn harm the continuity of creative work. For this reason alone, it should be tempered. Rather than attacking others, you could rage into a typewriter, write to yourself, even write letters to others (but do not send them for at least a week, until you have cooled down and can reread the letter!). You might consider addressing the anger at aspects of your past, or at parts of yourself. On tape or on paper, begin to speak to a parent about the first poem you created. Extend this speech to a mini-dialogue with your first schoolteacher. Or address that mealy-mouthed self inside that always has to get angry in order to work. Dialogues often can isolate parts of ourselves that sabotage what the rest of us want—in this case, to create without turning the world upside-down in the process.

It is simple to say that your state of mind, before work, should be free of all distractions, worries about survival, family, and love. Not only is this virtually impossible given both the precarious lifestyles that most artists lead, and also the great volatility of their emotions, but moreover, many artists *thrive* on worries and would be quite at a loss if they were suddenly shielded from them. All people have worries—the real problem occurs when you feel that you must *first deal with the source of these worries before creating*. Obviously, it is appropriate to worry and deal with paying the rent if the landlord will be banging on the door, or to deal with sickness. On the other hand, worrying about the rent six months from now, or running twenty miles a day, can be an

evasion. Better to push yourself to work, and tolerate the anxieties about secondary issues. These issues will always exist in one form or another. The kind of maturity that enhances continued productivity embraces these anxieties, absorbs them, and gets on with the work at hand. Everyone has to determine where to draw the line between primary objects of worry, and secondary ones, and the line will change at different stages of life. As most people age, their tolerance for insecurity and discomfort lowers, so that worries about money and relationships seem to increase in number. Although the number of worries increases, the intensity of the worries and the vulnerability to them generally decreases.

Some artists create out of depression and so unconsciously give themselves things to be depressed about. If it does not lead to suicide, self-mutilation, or fed-up family and friends, depression can be a productive way of life, impeded only by the growing cost of Kleenex tissues.

Human beings are subject to an entire range of emotions daily, even simultaneously. It is self-defeating to insist upon the presence of one particular emotion in order to create. Such insistence often masks a fear of expression itself. Once you begin to work, all your emotions will emerge organically and will be expressed in that work. If you require some state of mind to begin, make it a slightly tough, "I'm not gonna take any more of this crap! I'm gonna start working!"

CHAPTER 3

STARTING AND WORKING

A. STARTING FOR THE NON-PROFESSIONAL

HARRIET WAS A 43-YEAR-OLD WOMAN whose children had gone off to college. She had taken some painting courses some time ago as a college student and had toyed briefly with the idea of pursuing a career in the arts. Then she met George, settled down, and though she had intended to continue painting, two children and all the household duties had not permitted her the time. Now, with the kids at school and George at the peak of his business career, Harriet found that she had a great deal of time to spare. She had the security of George's large income, she had a beautiful sun-lit room that she could use as her studio, and she had a family and a circle of friends who were ready to support her emotionally in her "hobby."

For six months, Harriet had spent her time fixing up this studio, buying materials, reading art magazines, attending gallery and museum shows, but every time she stood in the studio before a blank canvas, she just didn't feel ready to begin. After a few moments, she would remember that she should write one of her sons a letter, or get in some more shopping before the supermarket closed, or get the car washed. Harriet kept waiting until the right moment to begin, hoping that the moment would come of its own accord. She had been told a number of times that such things couldn't be forced, and she decided it was best to loosen up and let the inspiration "strike."

A twenty-year lapse had created a discontinuity in Harriet's creative processes. Yes, she had raised her children, kept the house, and led her life in as creative a way as she had known how, adapting her solutions to ever-changing circumstances, but the direct creative processes of painting had been shelved for twenty years. Her memory of her college days, when she would run into the art department studios and joyfully mix

her colors, knowing, just knowing that whatever she began on the canvas would come out all right in the end, was a memory of another person, with different thoughts, feelings, and sets of experiences. As a college student, life was so much more confusing and difficult than it was now. At that time, painting served as a refuge, a quiet relief from the exciting but startling new world around her. Now, twenty years later, her role as wife and mother was a relief to her and a security. She was very good at these things. Harriet knew that. She had gained easy control over each activity and knew exactly what to expect from herself. Going into the supermarket was like going into the home of an old friend. Getting the car washed was a simple procedure that always turned out so very well. Cooking was fun, and, of course, it was a necessity for the household. All of these things had become so integrated into the rhythm of her existence that Harriet would never have known now how to begin life without performing them. Painting, on the other hand, was just plain scary. There is nothing more anxiety provoking than an empty canvas. What could she expect from the paint, from herself? Suppose she should make a terrible work, suppose that after all this preparation, all these years waiting for this time of freedom, she should come up finally, with nothing? Far better to wait a bit longer, to return to those activities that were more familiar.

Arthur was an accountant, a successful one, and he'd been at it for fifteen years. He'd always wanted to write, however, and every day at work, when he got ideas for stories, he quickly jotted them down on little scraps of paper. He hoped that some day, when he had more time, he'd be able to pull out some of these scraps and work out a real story. This had been going on for some time, and Arthur had never been able to find that extra moment. The more successful he was at the job, the harder and later he worked. When he returned home at the end of the day, he was exhausted. It was all he could do to eat dinner with Marge and the kids, trying to carry on a coherent conversation, and then an hour later falling asleep before the TV. On weekends, he and Marge entertained clients or used the time to take the kids boating. He suddenly realized that unless he took firm control of his life and set aside some time to write, those scraps of paper would never develop into something else.

Both Harriet and Arthur had led fairly traditional lives, and each of them wanted to become more creative without sacrificing the gains made in their lifestyles. Harriet had a large amount of time and energy available to her, but she just couldn't get herself

to begin. Arthur showed his commitment to a beginning but he just couldn't find the time. I've found that non-professional artists often have tremendous resources of creativity and imagination available to them as a kind of "potential energy." These people, who may be secretaries, lawyers, accountants, or salesmen in the daytime, can, when their energies are released, create works of great originality and beauty. After all, though their jobs may seem uncreative, their lives are imbued with a yearning and sensitivity for both excitement and higher purpose.

The key here is *the release of creative energy* towards the development of an art form. If one has the will to begin an art form one can just jump in and "explore" it. The notion of exploring is fairly low-key, non-threatening, and fun-filled. There was no reason for either Harriet or Arthur to feel that they were entering a territory of professionals and that they must first pass muster before being permitted to enjoy the art form. They were at the beginning stages, moments that should have been pleasant and exciting. Harriet's studio, filled with the best art materials, must have been tremendously scary. She was measuring herself in her mind's eye against all the professional artists standing before a canvas in their studios. Eventually, Harriet was encouraged to close up the studio for awhile, to take some old paper and pencils, go to the most comfortable room in the house, which happened to be the porch, and to "mess around" on the paper: to doodle, and to sketch whatever came into her head. The paper was cheap enough and because it was of such poor quality, it could never be *exhibited* or *collected*. It was only for her, to be thrown away or into a drawer. Because Harriet still enjoyed watching the Soaps, she brought the little TV onto the porch and sketched while she watched it.

A few months later, the studio was still closed up, but the porch was looking more and more like a kind of studio. Drawings were tacked onto the wall. Pencils, water colors and large supplies of better-quality paper lay in little piles on the floor, and by now the TV, which still sat on the cabinet, was gathering dust, its plug pulled out of the socket.

Arthur was asked to choose one night every week, after dinner, to sit before his typewriter and type whatever he wanted for at least an hour. If at the end of the hour, he wanted to watch TV or go to sleep, fine. If he felt like continuing, great. The first few weeks, Arthur just typed how he was feeling about things, about his job, the family finances, then about how it felt to be typing like that. He watched the clock and

stopped after an hour to watch TV. The fourth week, something unusual happened. He got to writing about a memory of when he was a little boy, something he hadn't thought about in many years. And then he was typing a little story based on that memory. When he finally pulled the last page out of the typewriter, he was surprised to realize four hours had elapsed.

When he woke up the next morning, Arthur got ready for work as usual, but as he was shaving, he remembered that he had written quite a bit the night before. He smiled to himself, thinking that the writing would probably look pretty silly to him now. He happened to walk past the typewriter table and picked up the last few pages he had written. Glancing down to read a few lines Arthur thought they weren't all that bad—still needed some work though, to get it just right. It wasn't exactly what he had meant. He sat down just for a moment, while the coffee was brewing, and changed a few words. Then he crossed out a line, and added another above it. Then he thought he knew what the page was really about and that it would take just a moment more to rewrite it. He rewrote the page in five minutes, read it over, and thought it wasn't bad at all. Without really knowing why, Arthur shoved the pages into his briefcase and left for work.

At noon, Arthur realized he had no lunch appointments, and he wasn't all that hungry, so he decided he'd just relax at his desk for a while, maybe make some notes on the meeting later on that afternoon. He put a paper into the typewriter and started to type a list of all the things he needed to bring up. As he was typing, he mused that this would make an interesting beginning for a story—a list of things the main character would say and do for the duration of the story. He took out his list of reminders for the meeting, put it to one side, put in another piece of paper, and started to type a list of whatever came into his head. A few things felt right. Others seemed like dead ends. He became a bit clearer. He pulled the page out and started again. This time he knew he was on to something good. By the end of an hour, his four-page story was complete. It was the first story he had completed since he had taken a creative writing course in college. A year later, Arthur is doing well at his job and is hard at work on his novel during the evenings. He doesn't even think about what it would be like not to write. He just does it—as much as he can.

The stories of Harriet and Arthur have rather happy endings. They illustrate the optimistic point that it is possible for anyone who really wishes, to begin to practice an

art form. There is *not necessarily* a conflict between a full, traditional life and the fulfilling practice of an art. History is full of the tragic examples of those like Kafka who tread back and forth between his dreary job at the Prague Insurance Company and his little writing room at night, but it is also filled with hopeful examples like Chekhov the writer-doctor, Malraux the writer-statesman, and William Carlos Williams the poet-dentist. These were people who were able successfully to combine a more traditional and time-consuming profession with the very intense practice of an art form.

For some, of course, there was an irretrievable split. Gaughin left his job with the bank to paint full-time. But things need not be so radical for most of us. Especially if it is not necessary to make survival income from the art form, this seeming duality can actually give more freedom to the kind of art that is created. The most notable example is the great American composer Charles Ives, whose full-time work in business was successful enough to give him the great security with which to create highly original, pioneering works of music.

The most important thing is simply to do it, to begin it and to continue, to fulfill oneself with what is interesting, fun, and meaningful. Later, much, later, after that “hobby” is stabilized and secure, if the creator feels a need to communicate the work to others, then various venues can be explored. For the moment, we're dealing only with getting you started, with keeping the goals manageable and meaningful. Above all, remember to relax, release, and have a good time. Set aside a minimal amount of time for some of the exercises and see how things go. There are hundreds of thousands of good people like you all over the country who are getting back to or beginning to paint, write, act, dance, sing, make pots and silver earrings, and most of them lead very full lives in addition. It *can* be done, and once you've begun, you'll probably wonder why you waited so long.

B. GET SET

WAITING IS AN EVASION OF THE FIRST ORDER brought on by the terror of seeing anything less than brilliant trickle out of our meager little souls. Rather than admit that we possibly are not a genius creator all the time, or even any of the time, we wait for confidence that may never come. No matter how you feel—elated, depressed, like an

artist, or like a butcher, drag yourself over to the typewriter or the canvas or the piano, and simply begin. Whatever comes out is OK. The minute you say, "Today is not the day for it," you set in motion a process of procrastination and submission to fear that will only intensify as the days go on. Forcing yourself to *begin* work shows that retrogressive force that you mean business.

In addition to its psychological value, just hunkering down will maintain your technique. If only 10% of the times you begin when you don't feel like it are productive, it's well worth it. Chances are, the percentage will increase. And what greater exuberance than when you're suddenly working and realizing that what you felt a half hour before was only a load of resistance?

If such evasions have become chronic, it is no mere thing for you to drag yourself over to begin. In this case, strike a bargain with yourself. Every day, start working at a time that will let you go on for awhile, if you are able to. Promise yourself that for the first week, you will begin work and continue for fifteen minutes. If, at the end of that time, you still don't feel like working, stop and do something else. The second week, work for thirty minutes, the third, for an hour. If for a single day, you forget that you can stop, the block will have begun to dissolve.

When you enter into this contractual relationship with your block, the block will fight back with excuses like, "It won't make any difference, I know already that I don't have anything to say now." You can answer, "Maybe you're right, but what difference does a lousy fifteen minutes make? Are you so chicken-livered that you even avoid fifteen minutes?"

How to use those first fifteen minutes? Put the paper into the printer, put your fingers above the keys of the word-processor, and start to type. "Type what?" Type anything! You can do that, can't you? "But what's the sense?" You're not going to use up the fifteen minutes by talking! Type! Anything! Your name, chapter heading, even your bank statement. . .for fifteen minutes!

Now even if you take the easy way out by typing your bank statement every day for a couple of days, sooner or later you're going to feel like a moron, and you'll start typing other things as well. . .and sooner or later. . .*Place yourself into position* and let the rest follow!

C. THE CLOCK

SOME ARTISTS FIND THAT THE BEST TIME for them to work is in a particular season, or a particular day of the week, or time of day. If they continue this way without problems, they are lucky to have found something that works. More often, however, problems arise. For example, an artist who thinks he can only work late at night, comes home exhausted from a job, and sleeps through his work time. The open weekends are useless because he can't work during the days, and the evenings are too noisy from the nearby partying. Artists tend to be inflexible about many aspects of their work. Unfortunately, the outside world is just as inflexible, and conflicts result if you cannot open up your system. We are continually changing, and to remain inflexible is self-defeating, especially when the problem is entirely within ourselves. We can grow by remaining open and by our willingness to experiment with our system.

Survival jobs, as well as the needs of family and friends, often wreak havoc with schedules. The more complex life becomes, the more time conflicts there will be. What about the time one *must work*? What about deadlines, both externally and internally imposed? The most rigid of the external deadlines are those in which our physical presence as well is monitored, as in another's workplace. The job must be done by a certain time, and an anxious boss continually checks our progress.

This situation is usually accepted only in return for money. Financial reward seems to be in proportion to how much we submit to another's control. This holds true even when an artist works alone, on his own time, on his own projects, keeping in mind what style is in vogue at the marketplace. In the studio, this leads to enervation and subsequent rebellion, because you are pouring out your energies for someone else. Remember that you have chosen to do this work (whether it be commercial art, advertising art, promotion writing or sit-com directing) because of the positive rewards you gain from the world, namely the exercise of your craft, the pleasure of a restricted form, the acceptance and need of the work, and of course, as always, the money. If you choose to stay, you choose to stay, and anger should not be directed against a situation that is a given. On the other hand, if you thrive on rebellion, tightly disciplined work experiences may be just the thing, assuming others continue to tolerate your excesses.

More often, deadlines are self-imposed. More ambitious artists often set themselves a schedule of staggering rigidity. A painter with a show opening in six

months laid out a plan on a piece of paper that had him waking every day at 6 a.m., and working until midnight, with an hour off for eating and the toilet. If this works, it's fine. But because it worked for this artist, doesn't mean it might work for you. Failure to keep such a schedule, once outlined, could mean depression, guilt, feelings of inferiority and failure.

If you're having difficulties starting work, it's a good idea to make a *modest* compact with yourself. You can always "up" the ante later on when you have proved to yourself that you can keep this one contract. Don't be too rigid. You can miss one day for any reason, and *real* sickness can excuse you on other days. See how that works. If you should look back and see that you are asking too little of yourself, raise the standards. If you are asking too much, sit down with yourself and try to understand what the problems are. You can't get a clear picture of your problems until you start trying to work. This will allow them to arise naturally. If, even with a modest, internally imposed schedule, you rebel, externalize the rebellion. Write or improvise a dialogue between yourself and the schedule and see where it takes you. Have the schedule defend itself, and then attack it. Play out the argument all the way. See who is actually behind the schedule, what he/she looks like, what the voice is like. You might surprise yourself with its resemblance to some one or more people living or dead. Once you've made that connection, you'll be a long way towards clearing away impediments. Now go back to this present schedule and rethink it so that it becomes more clearly something you, yourself, have created. Structure into it rewards that no one else would ever have thought to offer you. Make the written schedule itself a work of art, in both verbal and graphic terms. Have fun with it. It will be your personal, unique message to yourself, for no one else to see. And now, you're ready to begin work.

D. INTERRUPTIONS AND RETREAT

SUPPOSE THAT YOU HAVE UNDERGONE the meditation, the exercises, the understanding and restructuring of your life and work processes in such a way that your work flows quite smoothly now, and you very much enjoy the process and the product. You have enough food to keep you from falling over as you work, the landlord is not bothering you for the rent, the telephone company is not dunning you for ten unpaid bills, and

you do not receive a hysterical telegram from someone you provoked a few days before.

There is an idea bursting inside you, and you have not had uninterrupted time for quite awhile. You've been saving your earnings so that you could take time off and get down to your project. You are going to retire to your studio for at least two weeks and work, uninterrupted by anyone or anything. You will turn on the answering machine and stock in food and supplies to avoid going outside. You will even resist the impulse to get the mail, which seems to whet your appetite for contact.

Let's assume that you have prepared those close to you, or that you have retreated to an isolated cabin or beach house somewhere "away from it all." The first few days of withdrawal from society will be as difficult as withdrawal from chain-smoking, overeating, or drug-use. You are going to be very lonely and tempted either to call the people you've just told to leave you alone, or to initiate relationships in your newly-formed habitat. Those who escape to artist colonies often find themselves involved in new relationships just as intense and exhausting as the ones left behind. Rather than yield to impulse, you should be honest with yourself *before retreating*, by realistically gauging your capacity for sustained solitude and attendant loneliness. Allow yourself some companionship, by telephone or through new acquaintances; or say to yourself, ok, this is my chance to work and nothing is going to upset this.

If you choose total isolation, then you should be aware of the powerful ambivalence towards solitary life, and understand impulses to reenter as withdrawal symptoms. Muster all your resources towards getting back to your work and recycling that energy where you had originally intended to place it.

Now you are somehow working. You may have come to this point with a specific goal in mind: getting started on a project, or completing one. As you work, you lose consciousness of time. You notice that it is suddenly darker outside or that the sun is coming up. The usual cues are missing: the mailman, the subway noise, the church clock. Your rituals, your walk to the store for the paper, your drink at that bar down the street, are suspended, and the only thing you recognize and care about is what is coming through your voice or your fingers, your thoughts and feelings. You may forget to eat or sleep, you lose awareness of your appearance. You are no longer doing this for someone else, or for respect, status, or survival. You are conscious only of the next step before you. Sometimes, at moments of exhilaration, other thoughts arise, thoughts of

success, of other's appreciation. These thoughts are a species of parasite, taking a free ride upon your fulfillment until they threaten to run it to the ground. You become depressed, angry, first at those others, and finally at yourself, for succumbing so easily to this inner ploy. And your anger forces you back into work. You push on until you realize you are no longer pushing but are again being drawn, gently pulled along out of yourself by a thread of consciousness. And again the exhilaration comes and this time you flow with it, refusing to give way to those voices ready to pull you away, and you drift through time and space. There are no voices but your own and those you have loved. And you move from them, pass through them and glorify them by acknowledging their power. There is nothing else but what you are feeling at that moment, there is nothing and no one on earth around you but the flow of your experience.

And then—. . .one morning you wake up and look at what you've done and know that it is finished. There is an emptiness within you where joy should be, but there is also a peace, and you go back to sleep.

You are now preparing to return to the outside. You think of your friends and in your mind they ask you what you've accomplished, and there is a sick feeling in your chest when you try to think of your answer. Or they want to tell you of the movie they've seen, or the party they've gone to, their new boyfriend or girlfriend, and you do not care, will not care, and will grow angry at their pulling you down. You think of how the work will go to the public, of how there will be a price upon it, how you will be asked about it by critics, and you grow angry and swear you will not give it up and that you will not return and they can all go to hell! That evening you call a friend, the one you feel will understand. She says that she cannot speak right now because she has someone there. You politely say you understand and hang up, realizing that this world outside you has been moving along in its own flow without you. Your friends have lived lives apart from you and those intervals of life they possess are unmarked by your experience. You are lonely and fearful and unsure of who you are for them. You forget the experience of saying good-bye to them because that was said by another person long ago, and you cannot be certain you will be received again.

You call another, and stammer that you're back in circulation. You want to offer something up as proof that you care, so you begin to talk of your experience. As you listen to yourself talking, you see you are talking of someone who was not there, of

something that did not happen. You are losing touch with that person in the room as you reach out to others. You try to keep them together, but they fall apart and suddenly you are freely talking, remembering nothing but the outer shell, the looks, sound, or meaning, and the excitement is not there, and it all seems like a delusion. You hang up the phone, stare at the wall, and take out what you've done—it is no longer there—you've failed—and you are alone. You've given up the world for your work. The work has failed—and your world is no more.

The next day, a friend you called stops in to see you, and you show him the work. He looks at it for what seems an age, and you see then that he cannot take his eyes off it and cannot say anything. You look, too, and the emptiness goes away and you want to cry.

You are now on the street, walking with your work under your arm, to your gallery. You know what you want and are prepared both to ask for it and to fight for it. Your work will be a product, but one that will not be perverted, transformed, bastardized. You believe in its worth, and you believe the public will appreciate not an artificial semblance of it, but the thing-in-itself-as-you-created-it. You believe this so strongly that you will firmly and reasonably argue the point, and will persevere until the work can appear in such a way that you can say, "This is as I meant it to be."

PART II: PITFALLS

CHAPTER 4

WORK BLOCK

A. INTRODUCTION

I BEGAN WRITING THIS BOOK IN 1980 with a modest advance from my publisher. For the fifteen previous years, I had been heir to uninterrupted creativity, completing drawings, paintings, collages, multi-media performance pieces, animated shorts, and my first book, a manual on digestive health. I had taught a number of courses at SUNY, Purchase, and the University of Vermont that had to do with the psychology and practice of creativity, and had given creativity workshops for artists with work blocks in New York. Both my editor and I felt that I would have no difficulty at all in putting my thoughts together in a manual of this sort.

Unfortunately, we were both quite wrong. It has taken me fifteen more years personally to fight through *all the pitfalls* I had initially planned rather glibly to cover in Part Two. Though I've had little difficulty in completing a number of short films, I have been intermittently blocked in writing this book. In these periods, I began to compound the problem by talking about my book to both my editor and my friends as if I were indeed hard at work on it. Under external and internal pressure, I then submitted an undeveloped manuscript to my publisher which, when it was rejected, caused me to waste time in trivial refinement of the text out of fear of completing it. I became exhausted with the project and depressed about my own capacity to tell others how to do what I had become unable to do myself. As I entered into various mid-life crises and saw the publishing of other creativity books, I placed my manuscript further and further back in my filing cabinet. Six months ago, I pulled it out again and leafed through it. Putting the disk back into my hard drive, I began to make a few minor corrections in grammar. Within an hour, I began to change the text, and by the evening I realized that I was now in an ideal position to rewrite this book because I had in fact

experienced all these problems first-hand and could now express, better than I could in 1980, what one feels while subject to them. I still find myself battling demons, but this book has now become the humble result of that ongoing fight, one I hope that will be of more use to you than that over-confident manual I had begun fifteen years ago.

Fred had been a full-time painter for over fifteen years. Living in New York, he organized a group of abstract painters whom he vigorously defended, he found a gallery that understood and pushed their work, and he continued to develop his art year after year despite all the problems typical of such a full commitment. He never had much money in the bank and he had no health insurance, but he was still in his early thirties and had no use for such things if they conflicted with the time he set aside for his artwork.

When he was thirty-five, Fred married Jill, and a year later they had their first child. New York began to seem very dirty and loud, and though they both enjoyed the cultural opportunities, they began to spend more and more of their spare time in New England. At 37, Fred was offered a teaching job in a small New England College. He figured he would still have his gallery, would invite friends up from time to time, and would come down to the City every month or so. And after all, the hours actually spent teaching full-time would be much less than the sum total of all the hours spent on part-time jobs in New York. Fred took the job and moved his family to a small rural town near the college.

It took Fred more time than he had thought to prepare for his classes, to attend meetings, and hold office hours. For the first year, he had little time for his own work, but felt fairly confident after fifteen years of continued productivity, that his work would resume when he had the teaching under control. In fact, he looked forward to his first summer vacation and planned a series of paintings to be completed in those three months. When June came around, however, he was exhausted, his mind still full of his first year of teaching, and he took a long-needed rest, trying his hand at Kayaking, working with Jill in the garden, and enjoying his time with his young daughter. He then spent July working a bit on the house and installing large picture windows in his studio. In August, he started to worry about the new course he was to teach and divided his time between swimming and preparation for the course. He felt sure that with his teaching more under control this fall, he could begin to paint again in the late afternoons. Besides, summers were never the best time for his work anyway.

In October, he still hadn't begun his painting, and the gallery called to schedule his next show. When asked how much new work he had, Fred was caught off guard, answering that he had completed five or six really interesting new works. The show was scheduled for May. Fred thought that seven months would be enough to complete the work, especially with the long Christmas break and the spring break.

It was December before Fred found time to get into his studio. There always seemed to be something more important—the teaching duties, the house, his daughter, and then his mother who had been ill. It had been a year and a half since Fred had seriously painted. Oh, he had done a number of small sketches to keep his hand in, but now, walking into a barren studio, Fred had to realize just how long it had been since he had felt like an artist. He slowly took out a few older canvases, studied them, and made some notes. Then it was nearing lunchtime, so he went back into the house. After lunch it snowed heavily, and Jill had to get to her job, so Fred went out to help shovel the driveway. It was getting dark when he returned to his studio. As he entered it, there seemed to be a deathlike cast of shadow that made him very nervous. He sat down and stared at the old canvases. They seemed so far away from him now. He didn't know quite how he had done them, who he was when he had done them. He thought back over the last year and a half. Had he made the right choice? He was comfortable in the country and felt relatively at ease with life, but here, finally here in the studio, he felt awkward, a little irritated, depressed. He had a show coming up, something that in the past would have been a source of great excitement. But now it filled him with dread. How could he get himself back into that kind of flow and finish all the work? He thought momentarily of quitting his job, or of asking a friend to take over for awhile. Then he thought maybe he still wouldn't get back to the work. Something seemed missing. Some kind of consciousness or force of will. Could it be that he just didn't care any more? Was he afraid? Was his life as an *artist* finished?

By now, it was completely dark in the studio, and Fred had no wish to turn on the light. He sat there letting his eyes move over the grey shadows until he found a spot of complete blackness, allowing himself to rest there, sinking more deeply into the coolness. It had been so long since he had paused like this, so long since he had really seen himself. Fred permitted his thoughts to run freely through, skimming the surface of time until he was back in New York sitting in a bar with Michael, an older sculptor who was telling him about his fight to continue working. That had been the first time

Fred had caught a clear vision of what it was like to block. He had said some glib things to Michael about how Michael was strong enough to continue, that Michael had too much to say to stop for a moment. Then Michael had dropped out of sight for a while. When Fred had seen him next, at an opening in Soho, Michael had looked different somehow, a little worn, older. There was a slight strain between them that Fred couldn't quite put him finger on, but now he remembered that for the first time, he had stopped himself from asking how Michael's work was going.

Fred grew suddenly nervous in the darkness. As he turned on the light above him, he had the fleeting thought that his own New York friends had stopped asking him how his work had been going. Fred turned out the light and walked out of the studio into the snow. As the cold air hit his cheeks and he listened to the crunch beneath his feet, he forgot for a moment. Then as he neared the house, the words seemed to jump into his mind's eye, "I'm not working. I'm blocked." From that simple moment, Fred had given himself a chance. He was at a crossroads. He could continue being too busy to get back to his painting while still trying to maintain that identity, causing an ever widening split and self-deception. Or he could recognize the split as a new stage of life at which he was *choosing* to relinquish his identity as a full-time painter for that of teacher and give his new profession all that he had to offer. Or he could give up teaching, and the security and fulfillment of helping others for the chance to regain his old identity (and the risk that he could not). Or he could try to integrate his new life style into the old one in such a way that each gave to the other.

It so happened that Fred, after a period of depression and fear that followed this recognition, ultimately chose to integrate his painting into his teaching. In effect, he had to begin at the beginning again. He *was* a different person now and the old canvases were on a through-line that was too distant from who he now was. It was painful to begin again. Fred had to walk into the studio every day after a hard day's teaching and look at half-finished work that was confused, certainly not up to the level of the old work. His gallery was no longer interested in this work, or in him, and he began to read in the *Times* reviews of shows by artists he had once known as below his level. It was painful, humiliating at times, but Fred worked on. After two years, he managed to get a show of his work at an upstate gallery. It wasn't New York, but it felt good nonetheless.

Fred's life has reached stability now. He has the tenure he sought at the college. He's able to find time to develop his painting, perhaps not as intensely as he once did, but he himself is no longer as intense, and his work is shown in a number of group shows around the country. Fred had been able to face himself, to recognize a block, to make the necessary choices, and then to go on with his life.

Tim's solution was not as happy. Tim had gotten his first novel published at the age of 23 and had gained immediate recognition. Readers and critics awaited his next book, and Tim had a very large advance and two years to complete it. Because of the sudden recognition accorded Tim's first work, he was invited to a number of literary parties and was generally feted as one of our great up and coming writers. Like Dylan Thomas in the last six years of his life, Tim began to spend more and more of his time being "the writer" and less and less time writing. He would lie to his editor about the progress on the book, telling himself that he needed a period of rest after completing his first book—a germination period. A year and a half went by, and Tim had got into the habit of talking through his book at cocktail parties, gaining everyone's admiration, and going home with the girl of his choice. His editor began to push Tim for a few chapters, and Tim promised them in a few months. Finally, he sat down to write. It was a tremendous struggle to put something on paper, a much grater effort than the first book had been. That first book had been a work of love. He had been thinking about it for years, had been writing notes for it daily, and had gone through a number of drafts to get it just right. This new book was still undeveloped. He hadn't been writing notes in the same way, and after talking through parts of the book at social gatherings, Tim just didn't have that same energy to write.

What had begun as social drinking just to relax gradually turned to serious drinking. He'd drink heavily at parties, then come home and drink in order to get himself to work. Then he'd drink to get himself to sleep. Slowly the book was written, but it didn't have the same sense of power, of control. It was self-involved, forced, a bit chaotic, and when he finally gave it to the editor, the editor told him as tactfully as possible that they had chosen not to publish it—that it would damage Tim's reputation as well as their own.

Tim went into a funk. He drank all the more, became hostile to those close to him, and stopped writing altogether. He began to rave against a world of pedestrian critics and a TV-watching public who could never appreciate real writing. When his

editor wrote to suggest that Tim rewrite the book for them, Tim flew into a rage, saying that he'd rewrite it for himself and take it elsewhere. Then Tim's life went through a series of reversals. Short on money, he was forced to sell his loft and move into a small apartment in Brooklyn. His health began to fail, his friends withdrew from him, and he continued to drink heavily. He could not return to his writing, telling himself and others that the world threw too many obstacles in the way of a true writer for someone like him to have the time and energy to work. He became an embittered person, surviving on doing freelance work for book reviewers.

Tim never reached the point of self-revelation that Fred had reached. Because he denied the fact of his block, he denied also the opportunity to face it, make clear-cut choices, and reverse it. It takes great courage to face oneself in this way, and then a greater courage to make a choice and act upon it. For some, like Tim, it is less painful to hide from oneself, and to treat what would otherwise be a willful choice as one's fate or effect of living in a given environment.

Both Fred and Tim began with a minor cessation of work, a normal inactivity. Fred chose to change his lifestyle drastically and could not easily integrate all the elements of his life. Tim's momentum stopped of its own accord when the book was completed. He was probably exhausted and needed time not only to rest but also to absorb new experiences, germinate new ideas. Also, he had not had much experience with success and, quite frankly, had to learn to cope with it. People in all creative fields go through periods of creativity that are defined that way by virtue of the fallow periods that surround them. This is a normal ebb and flow of consciousness that does not severely concern the experienced person. In some cases, however, periods of normal inactivity are extended for various reasons into full-fledged work blocks to which few creative people have been immune. These blocks are of great concern, and it is only through a greater understanding of them that one can help to prevent them and, once subjected to them, to work more smoothly through them. It is hoped that reading this book, and coming to grips with the insights gained, will help you avoid the extreme pitfalls undergone by Tim.

B. NORMAL INACTIVITY

ONE OF THE MOST DIFFICULT THINGS TO UNDERSTAND is the difference between normal periods of inactivity and sustained work block. It might well be a part of defensive technique, as it was for Tim, to refer to a real work block as *merely* a period of inactivity. It may also be masochistic to regard normal periods of inactivity as real work blocks. How can you know? First of all, time and duration of time play an important role in determining the nature of the block. Conceivably, work may be in the germination stage for more than a year, but that is highly unusual. Moreover, no rule says that all activity must cease while a single idea or experience germinates. Many artists continue to work, albeit at a reduced level of intensity, during latency periods. They are not averse to going through the motions, at the very least to keeping up their technique until "the spirit moves them." If you simply cannot actively involve yourself *in any aspect of your work*, and this feeling persists for more than a few months, then some conflict is unresolved, and there is most definitely a blockage.

On the other hand, it is perfectly normal to go through periods of emptiness, even depression, following periods of great creativity. Low periods are a kind of emptying device by which the mind cleanses itself of past selves, past values and priorities no longer appropriate after the growth caused by the creative process. These lows are often misinterpreted as guilt for creation or for success. Though this is sometimes the case, you can distinguish between the two by the edge on the depression. A slight fearfulness, irritability, may be caused by guilt and suspicion, whereas a pure depression, a feeling of having reached the end of one's process, is almost peaceful, though it may be upsetting to friends and relatives. All successful artists have had such latency periods that seem to play an integral part in the ebb and flow of the creative processes. These periods are transitory and ultimately cleansing and necessary. Do not add to the depression feelings of guilt and hopelessness because you interpret the depression as permanent and pathological. Discuss such latency periods with those close to you *before* you are involved in one. This prepares others, and enlists warmth, understanding, and support during these periods.

During low periods, some artists pursue trivial but necessary activities such as purchasing equipment, writing business letters, fixing up the loft or the farm-house. Others use these periods to hustle their work. Still others take trips to unknown places. Any solution is fine if it takes the edge off the hopelessness.

There are artists who use these periods to overwhelm themselves with alcohol, drugs, and transitory sexual encounters. These are stopgap solutions, offering relief in the evenings and causing tremendous depression the morning after. Moreover, they generally extend the latency period, and sometimes lead to *a full-fledged creative block*, because the normal flow is muddled. Beneficial activities during this period include: reading books, journals, experiencing nature, manual labor of any kind, meditation, writing letters, playing in a different art form, cooking, cleaning, exercising, playing sports, dancing—all the kinds of things that have little or nothing to do directly with your art form.

When you begin to get new ideas for projects, work them out in self-communication exercises. Place yourself in creative position for work, setting a modest schedule for the first few weeks. If the low ebb persists for months, if your pressures build, and you begin to rationalize, procrastinate, even lie to your friends and associates about your productivity, then you may have a sustained work block or some other serious problem.

C. SUSTAINED WORK BLOCK, AND SOME SOLUTIONS

ALL CREATION INVOLVES RISK-TAKING. THERE IS THE RISK of not finishing or of dissatisfaction. There is the risk that the work will not communicate--to the maker, to those close to him, to the community at large. The more innovative and personal the creation, the greater the risk. Risk brings excitement, but also anxiety. When the anxiety is too great or our tolerance too weak, we are overwhelmed and cannot work freely. There are a myriad of techniques for lessening anxiety, some productive, some counterproductive.

Many artists drink or take drugs to decrease the anxiety. Others may take stimulants such as amphetamines to increase the excitement that may temporarily overwhelm the anxiety. Stories of the alcoholic poets and playwrights of Ireland give seeming credibility to the advantages of alcohol, while it is well-known that drugs of all kinds play a large role in the working lives of many of our painters, filmmakers, writers, and advertising people. Many people must drink to socialize at a party. Such

people need the mechanical depressant of their anxiety so that they may be more *socially creative*, may feel interesting and original in their behavior and conversation.

There are positive and negative aspects of intoxication. Take a drink or a drug, and in a matter of minutes you are “stealed” or “fortified” against anxiety. You need only to order the drink and lift the glass, or to swallow or smoke the drug. The negative side effects of drinking and drug-use do not become apparent until later. To maintain the same defense against anxiety, dosages of alcohol and drugs must be gradually increased as our bodies and brains adjust to each new level of intake. As intake of the alcohol or drug increases, so also does the negative behavior associated with such usage, and so does the confusion of emotions and thoughts. Perception of reality, of self, becomes divorced from others' perceptions of us, and we lose that tension that in normal circumstances motivates growth and understanding of our work and ourselves.

The physiological difficulties with alcohol and drugs are well known. Many people have already decided that creation is the most important thing in life. If alcohol or drugs can enhance that process, they are willing to choose creativity over health. Unfortunately, this choice is usually made under the influence, which obscures the perception of long-range issues. It blurs the perception, for example, that you cannot create well with a liver damaged by alcoholism, or that your lifespan may be cut short by as many as twenty years.

Consider also that *the nature of the creative work* is influenced by alcohol or drugs. This may not be obvious at first, but as the tolerance level grows, and the intoxicated state becomes habitual, work may grow more chaotic, more private. And if the work is at all honest, if it reflects the inner self, it will reflect the duality of the habitual user, the non-high and the high selves, and it will reflect an empty assertiveness, one that slowly crumbles as the dependency grows.

Because these negative effects are not obvious from the outset, the user continues, and thereby deprives himself of other means of coping with anxiety. When he finally comes to see himself in realistic terms, at which point he may wish to withdraw and “go straight,” he is nevertheless aware, painfully, that he cannot create, cannot even think, because his work is so bound up with and dependent upon his habit. The problems of addicts are beyond the province of this book. If you find yourself among them, the best thing for you to do would be to get yourself to one of the

treatment centers in your area as quickly as possible. Let's hope, however, that few of you have gotten to this stage and that the road ahead will not be so difficult.

The following techniques of decreasing anxiety are more difficult to begin than are alcohol or drugs, but they are tremendously effective and fulfilling once begun. Because they depend only upon you, your own actions, your own feelings, and your own thinking, they also encourage growth, with none of the negative side effects of drugs. Even people at the crisis point in drug or alcohol use may employ some of the following techniques in conjunction with withdrawal.

1) STRUCTURAL REDUCTION OF ANXIETY presupposes a clear understanding of what it is in particular that is causing anxiety. For example, I've received two grants from the Vermont Arts Council to create animated films. Granting committees seem to prefer proposals that are specific and well organized. In my zeal to get a grant, I wrote a fine proposal in April of 1978 for a film I thought then I would like to begin in September. I received the grant in June '78 and after a few weeks of feeling very good for having received the grant, I began to think about beginning the film. I soon found that I was having a difficult time actually beginning the work. The particular inspiration I had felt in April had not persisted. There I was, having to muster up this impulse again after it had already been transformed into other ideas. By force of will, I did begin the project by September, but it kept drifting away from my original statement of intent. I felt free and fulfilled when I allowed the film to flow over to my true consciousness, and felt restrained, irritated and anxious when I remembered that I ultimately had to show the film to the Arts Council, and that it should resemble my proposal. It was a real struggle to complete the film. The Council seemed pleased with the result, and the film went on to a number of international festivals, *but I was not satisfied* with the film, and I was not fulfilled in the process.

From that time, I decided to write my grant proposals *taking into account* and *into structure*, who I was and the kind of processes I now knew I would usually undergo. Any proposal I could make for a film would have either to be very general or to incorporate into itself the notion of process and improvisation to which I was usually heir. Further, when I understood that receiving the money from a grant before doing the film made me feel anxious and less likely to

take risks, I would try to make a real beginning on the film before writing the proposal, and moreover, I decided to apply for grant amounts in small incremental increases. First, two grants each for \$1000, then for \$1500, one for \$2500, and so on, so that my tolerance of obligation would gradually increase. Such grant proposals may be less certain of being accepted (as compared to the more defined proposals of others), but what I lose in certainty, I gain in equilibrium when I do receive a grant. This was a structural solution.

A painter I knew became very anxious when she was scheduled to have a gallery show—so anxious that she was hampered in making the work needed to fill the show. On the other hand, she required the feeling of prior acceptance that came from being offered a show. Aware of precisely what made her anxious, she devised an ingenious structural solution to her anxiety. What she really needed was for a gallery owner to say, “I can't schedule you in for the near future, but I like your work, think it would fit in with my gallery and would like to keep you in mind, and maybe, *sometime later*, place you in a show.” Then she feels she is accepted and “has a place to go” later on, but there is nothing so definite that she is anxious—no feeling of *obligation* to produce or *expectations* to meet. Periodically, when she completed a cohesive group of works she remembered this gallery owner and paid a visit with slides of her new work. This may have resulted in a group or even an individual show at that gallery, or at another, within a year or so, and the show itself produced quite manageable anxiety that did not interfere with work. In fact, at the point that no more work was *required* to fill out a show, this artist, with “nothing to lose,” managed to create work that was even more developed than before. This too was a structural solution, defining needs and anxieties and working around them.

I teach animation to children in Vermont schools. Their work is exciting and usually finds its way to international festivals. If I were to tell a child before he or she created the work that this might happen, the child might become self-conscious and blocked, or might do work that would be less free and exciting. Only after the course is over do I ask for permission to show the work abroad. I make a structural choice.

There is a choreographer who leads a group of very serious dancers. She would never work them towards a presentation although most work that is

developed eventually leads to a performance. The work develops organically simply because they have an inner need to create it—the best way that they can. At a certain point, close friends are invited to watch and to give feedback on what the dance has meant for them. Little by little, more and more people are allowed to watch until at some point a performance is planned for the general public. This performance is not a very large jump from the last informal session. The transition from creative process to *performance* has been made in easy gradations, so that there is less danger of anyone's feeling that the work is suddenly not theirs, or that in any creative step along the way, their creative expression is at all being scrutinized or criticized.

There is a writer who, upon receiving an advance for a book, grows anxious and pressured. Knowing his propensity for blocking in such a circumstance, he devised a unique structural solution. When he receives an advance, he deposits the check into a trust account and does not withdraw it until the book is completed, at which time he also receives the other half of the advance from the publisher. This way, he feels that the obligation he is under is in fact very moderate. If he does not wish to or cannot write the book, he simply returns the money to the publisher. In this event, he gets to pocket the interest earned by the advance for his trouble.

There are structural solutions that may be feasible for every kind of anxiety and blockage. Once you understand the nature of the anxiety, you can experiment with solutions.

2.) ONE WAY TO REDUCE THE ANXIETY and pressures of risk-taking is by open and straightforward collaboration. Some art forms, such as dance, music, theater, and to some extent, film, are inherently collaborative because of the artistic and technical demands of the medium. Other forms, such as writing and most visual arts, are solitary activities. In collaborations, the pressures for completing the “final event” are shared and are therefore lessened for each individual.

3.) DIRECT CONFRONTATION WITH YOUR WORST FEARS: Left alone by my collaborator to write my first book five years ago, I grew anxious and tended to procrastinate. I told myself that I needed more research before I could write a

particular chapter. This sometimes was the real problem, but more often than not, there was no reason I could not at least *begin* the chapter. At other times, my typewriter broke down and I would have had to drive an hour to get it fixed, and it would have taken two weeks, so I waited until a trip to New York where someone I knew could fix it immediately, but the trip did not occur for four more weeks. And then there were all the more important issues that had to be attended to before continuing to write, such as harvesting the squash, cleaning out the barn, writing to friends, and extra office hours at the University. I felt I had to wait until there was a stretch of free time ahead in which to write uninterrupted.

Structural solutions were impossible since I had signed a book contract and had spent the advance within two weeks of having received it, *and* I had told all my friends and family that I was writing this book. My collaborator was not prepared to return to the book again until the editing of the final manuscript. I felt obligated to complete the book, as outlined, alone, and I hated every day when I woke up and knew it had to be done. The pressure increased as I placed other events and tasks in the way of writing it. The book was to have been completed in a year. At that point, I had finished 20% of it, and asked for an extension. Six months later, I had 30% of the book. Things did not look good. I was unable to work on other projects because of my guilt over not writing the book. At this point, my anxieties began to crystallize into very specific fantasies. At the end of my rope with nothing much to lose, I encouraged those fantasies to emerge, by typing to myself. The central question was, "*What is the very worst that could happen to me in writing this book?*"

My creativity, so long inhibited, leapt at the chance for self-destructive fantasy. Thousands of readers would be debilitated by following the advice of my book. I was being sued, humiliated, ostracized, and imprisoned. My aunt, who would already have sent copies to one hundred of her friends without reading it herself, would be suddenly told what was in the book and would refuse ever again to send me frozen-dough cookies.

Very soon, the catastrophic expectations had passed through the worst to the ridiculous, and I found myself beginning to write the book while I was already typing. Several things had happened. First of all, most blocks are caused

by fear of going ahead into even greater anxiety. Implicit in this fear of greater anxiety is the amorphousness of the anxiety one does feel. When the anxieties are made specific and concrete (although this is initially terrifying) it nevertheless dispels the greater anxiety of what may lie ahead. Also, anticipating catastrophe takes the edge off it; once recognized for what it is, the worst is not quite all *that* bad. Then reason can assert itself. Can this disaster actually happen? If it can, *what measures can be taken to diminish the chances of it happening at all?* Many fears come from childhood experiences, and are re-experienced with the confused vulnerability of a child. An adult pushes those childlike coping mechanisms into that misty realm of the unconscious. The block or paralysis wards off the anxiety associated with an activity. Like the child who pulls the covers over his head and tries to shut out angry conversations between his parents, by not working, by procrastinating, a grownup blocks out the thoughts and feelings that would otherwise accompany creative work. If you realize that the block is a kind of cover separating you from anxieties, you can begin to dismantle it. You can voice those anxieties, prod them to the surface, encourage them, exaggerate them—give them the equivalent of a media blitz in which they will wither away from overexposure.

4.) ONE WAY MANY ARTISTS COMPLETE the disintegration of those blocks, although this may not be the prime motive, is to TRANSFORM ANXIETIES INTO A WORK OF ART. Take that worst fear and express it in a painting, a poem, a play, a film. Dance it, sing it, play it beneath you. Exert your will to pass through it until you are past and above it, looking down upon it victoriously. You will have won at the point that you can, with no effort at all, make your fears look ridiculous. When my aunt's frozen-dough cookies entered the picture, my block was about to be digested.

5.) RESOLUTION OF SPIRITUAL CONFLICTS: For centuries in ancient India, sculptors carved cave walls and stone temples. In medieval Europe, monks painted church frescoes, and later, Moslem *artists* decorated mosques with intricate motifs.

The Indian temple was touched by the sculptor's God, and was visited by devout Hindus yearning to be touched through the stonework. The painting by the medieval monk was an icon for other monks and adherents to the faith, who were grateful to come into touch with the spirit as it came through the painter. Caesar was in another world, separated from the pure one by mutual consent. In contemporary times, the only separation between the artistic collaboration with spirit, and the material world of commerce and media, is the wall of the artist's studio, and even this is a fragile demarcation.

Whether or not the modern artist admits to this duality of the sacred and the profane, it underlies the creative process, and blocks may result because of it. Some artists resolve the conflict by refusing to serve up their work to Caesar at all. They work on docks, as waiters, as gardeners, carpenters, plumbers, even salesmen. Some teach art in elementary, junior high, high, or university level. These people do not depend upon the world's acceptance, transformation, and use of their work in order to continue to create it. They may wish to *communicate* their work to others, whether close friends, colleagues or strangers, but this communication is different, less constrained, less commercial, with fewer creative compromises.

Some artists seek out some version of a church or temple to which they can offer their work. It is not easy to find such equivalents, but real churches still need and commission works, albeit more in Western Europe than in the U.S. A composer may write a mass in memory of the death of a beloved and offer it as a public tribute. A sculptor may create a work as a public monument. An architect may design a space that induces a feeling of freedom and upliftment. These people look for a form of exhibition or distribution that serves some ethical or moral purpose. Money may pass into the hands of the artist, but this is *secondary* to both the creation of the work and to its communication with people. And this money is immediately recycled back into further work in the same spirit, as a kind of capital investment in an ontological future.

At the end of this continuum lies the artist who tries to create as purely as he can, as deeply in touch with the spirit as he can be. When the work is finished, he sends it forth and quickly turns to the creation of his next piece. His actions say either that it was the creative process and not the work itself that was

spirit-filled, or that the existence of the work is entrusted to the spirit that is outside him.

Many an artist would never admit to others or even possibly to himself, his sense of spirituality, and he may be unaware of the feelings of repulsion towards the public consumption of his work. Perhaps he walks out of his gallery opening after five minutes, and goes to get drunk. It is usually assumed that such people fear public reaction—rejection and humiliation. Although this sometimes is the case, it may also be that they cannot tolerate the transformation of their art into a commodity. Only the artist himself can know if this is the case. The claims of the spirit, in this time, in this country, are seldom made and hardly admissible and are often dismissed as excessive Romanticism. How many of the conflicts in artists have been characterized as neurotic, sexual, or identity problems, when they were actually spiritual conflicts?

Finally, assume that you have admitted to yourself, *I have a block*, have gone to its source, and you have experimented with various solutions and have found one that tentatively works. In the exhilaration of resumed activity, you imagine that things will be all right now. Experience must have told you that this is not realistic, that you often stop either because the work completed itself, or because the plumber is banging on your door. Suffice to say that the run of good work *will* end, and that its resumption again may not be so easy. In fact, chances are, the battles you just fought and won will have to be fought again—and again. But you have learned something about yourself and have put something into practice. When you are again faced with the same blockage, you might try to remember what you have just learned. Here are several strategies that should help:

- 1) Save all notes kept during this first confrontation with your block, be they written, taped, painted or otherwise. Put them in a separate file, clearly marked CREATIVE PROCESSES. Keep adding to this file as you go along.
- 2) Try to distill everything you have thought about the problem and the solution into one or two short simple sentences. Create a simple graphic incorporating

these sentences and frame it. Hang it in your work area where you are most likely to see it daily.

3) Ask a trusted friend, relative, or lover to remind you of what you have learned, at those times you are obviously blocked and begin to procrastinate. Be honest with this person beforehand as to the best way for this person to tell you these things so that you will not become angry and defensive.

4) Find a person who also has trouble with blocks and who is also attempting to fight them. Talk over the issues of concern to both of you, and *support each other*. Each of you will need help, reassurance, and the reminding of solutions at different times. This nucleus of two may expand into a support group that meets periodically to discuss these issues.

D. TRAVELER'S BLOCK AND SOME SOLUTIONS

YOU'VE BEEN SAVING FOR THIS TRIP for a long time. You will fly to Europe, get a Eurailpass, and spend three months just going as the mood dictates. You've always wanted to see the Flemish woodcarvings at the Rjiksmuseum in Amsterdam, and the Brueghels in the Kunsthistorisches in Vienna. You've wanted to sit by a brook on a mountain in Innsbruck with only the sounds of the birds and the soft wind around you and sketch to your heart's content.

You have now been there six weeks, with but two weeks to go, and your portfolio is empty. You are anxious, a little depressed, and are thinking of what you will tell them when you return—how you have gotten some wonderful ideas, planned out whole paintings, novels, plays, films, and how the trip has been worth it for the way it's given you the opportunity to see all these new things and meet all these new people, and how concrete work is actually not as important as these things. You begin to believe it, and to feel a little better, and the last two weeks you even put your portfolio away and just go out and enjoy yourself.

You've been back for four months now. You are paying off the loan that allowed you to travel, catching up on the job, and you are no closer actually to carrying out

those ideas and plans you made in Europe than when you were there. You tell yourself that as soon as you have time, you will really explode, but that you need more time for these ideas to germinate.

You go on to other things and the trip recedes in the distance. It was an experience, but when you are honest with yourself, you know that you failed.

Two years later, you are planning a trip again. You bring out the piece you've always wanted to finish and start to pack it, and suddenly you stop and everything comes back to you about the last trip. You are confused. You want to have work with you in case you feel you are into it, but on the other hand, bringing something you probably will not feel like doing is a weight on your back. The excitement of the trip ahead begins to pale. Wouldn't it be better to stay at home, save the money, and work in the studio?! Or would it?

Traveler's block is extremely common. It is a block not because work stops, but because there is a discrepancy between your expectations of the work you will do on your travels and what actually may occur. You must feel comfortable and secure in your environment before you permit the vulnerability that accompanies creative work. Your rituals, built up over years, are extremely difficult to maintain while travelling. These rituals provide the continuity and stability. They are a kind of mooring from which you can gently drift out beyond your normal everyday existence. Without these rituals, and without your familiar surroundings, it is extremely difficult to let go.

Not everyone freezes up, and a traveler may find a particular spot to which he *can* grow accustomed. The artist may then return often to the found place—be it the same room at the same pension, or the same cabin in the Maine woods. The situation is ideal for work, because it is away from normal interruptions and responsibilities, and because most vacation spots *are* restful, beautiful and inspiring.

Travel takes you away from your usual surroundings; it also takes you away from your usual self. Juxtaposed against a completely different landscape and people, whether or not you are changed objectively, you feel different. Just as a color changes hue and value as it is placed, successively, next to other colors, you change. How on earth can the work which issues directly and honestly from you, remain as it was at home?

It may be that you are the special kind of person centered so powerfully within yourself that your work continues uninterrupted no matter where you are. Chances

are, however, that like the rest of us, you are affected by change in external surroundings, and would profit from the following suggestions:

- 1) No matter what your resolutions, take only minimal amounts of work with you. Leave yourself open to explore new kinds of forms, techniques, and ideas as they emerge from within you on your travels. If you are a painter, you might wait until you arrive before buying colors (or finding them). If you are a writer, you may be more stimulated by the paper, pencils, or pens you may buy away from home.
- 2) Do not burden yourself by promising to begin work as soon as you arrive. On the contrary, tell yourself that you are going away for a change, to recharge your batteries, to rest, and that you may come home with nothing more than a tan. Then, anything you do while away is *extra*, fun, not for public consumption.
- 3) You might consider the possibility of experimenting with an art form that mirrors the mode of travel you have chosen. If you simply must see a city-a-day, search out a form that expresses this kind of quick fragmentation. If you enjoy train travel, look for a form that reflects continuous motion. Keep in mind that sitting on a train and facing where you have come from encourages memory, while facing forward encourages reverie and expectation.
- 4) Even if you are in a place where you know no one, try to meet native artists working in any medium. Ask to see their work, show them yours if you have brought any. Such relationships help you to feel part of that place and to express your ideas and feelings while there.

In large cities, you can go to an art gallery and ask the receptionist for names and addresses of artists, or you can find a cafe or restaurant where artists congregate. If you are a writer, you might try the bookstore that deals in more avant-garde literature. Go to a jazz club or a theater club, and just talk to people around you.

5) Walking through cities and through the countryside is stimulating and meditative. It permits digestion of the environment with the physical feeling of assertion. On these walks, you are more likely to gain ideas and images that can be utilized in your work. You might carry some of the implements of your craft in a little shoulder bag, and as you feel it, stop by a cafe or mountain stream and just play. When you look up from your play, many hours may have passed and you do not wish to stop working. You wind your way back to your hotel and the images continue to flow through your mind.

6) Do not lock yourself into irrevocable schedules, destinations, and people who are waiting for you at different stops. You never know what your moods will be, whom you will meet, what will occur. You need all the latitude you can get in your life so that it will be reflected in the breadth of your creativity. Do not demand or even expect anything from yourself other than to be and to grow. After you get the hang of it, you may well be hooked on travel for all your work.

CHAPTER 5

OTHER DEMONS

A. HOT AIR

MARY HAD BEEN TEACHING IN A RURAL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL for a number of years. Ever since she had given her class a project of making Aztec pots, she had been thinking of taking some time off to try some pottery herself. She had as much fun as the children and in trips to Boston, she found herself going to ceramic shows to see what people were doing. Finally, she wrote up a small Education Department grant to research traditional forms of pottery and got a half-year leave of absence.

There was a local pottery studio nearby where she decided to do most of her work, and she bought a small wheel to place on her patio. She had agreed to share her progress periodically with her school, giving little show-and-tell talks about her work as it developed.

At the beginning, everything was fine. Mary made some preliminary sketches in charcoal and turned a few interesting pots. That week, she returned to the elementary school, showed the sketches and pots, and gave her progress report. Proud that she was doing so much on her own, Mary spoke a bit more than she had originally planned. When one of her colleagues asked her, in front of the assembly, what she was going to do next, Mary improvised a number of details that she hadn't thought about until that moment. For a few moments, she fell back into a role as teacher and felt compelled to place what she was doing in a structured context. The reaction of the audience was quite positive. The children enjoyed the visual display and liked the idea of their teacher doing something so interesting. The other teachers were impressed with the seriousness of Mary's work and many told her, as she was leaving, how envious they were that Mary had pulled all this together in her life. As Mary got into her car and shut the door, she thought she may have said a little too much but she was happy with

the experience and felt that maybe that kind of improvisational talking was creative in its own way.

The next day, when Mary returned to her wheel, she tried to work out the ideas she had discussed with the school the day before. After a number of attempts, however, nothing succeeded. She wondered what it was she really could have meant. She grew slightly irritated at herself for talking so much and kept on the wheel until it was time for dinner.

The next few weeks, Mary kept trying to work out on the wheel the ideas she had verbalized. She grew more and more frustrated. Then the school principal phoned and asked her when she'd want to come in again for an assembly. Without thinking, Mary said next week would be fine. When next week came, Mary had nothing really to show. However, she had been thinking a lot about the work and had many ideas on historical through-lines of pottery that she thought she could share with the school. At the assembly, the children were disappointed that there was nothing to see, but Mary's explanations of what she was about to do, which by now were on a highly sophisticated level, greatly intrigued the staff who told the children afterwards that the idea was just as important as the concrete illustration of it.

As the semester went on, the children were to grow more and more disappointed because Mary rarely brought in any sort of visual display. She spent increasingly less time at the wheel, and more time studying books on pottery. She became extremely fluent on trends in the field and eventually wrote a paper for the Education Department that was later adapted into a syllabus for a workshop on the History of Ceramics. Mary went back to teaching and her wheel continued to gather dust. She was happy to have taken the time off and proud of her paper, but somehow, she remained dissatisfied. She had wanted more for herself, more fulfillment, and more excitement—something that could carry on after the term of the grant. Although the staff always enjoyed discussing the project with her, asking a multitude of sincerely felt questions, the children stopped talking about her work and most of them forgot in time why she had taken time off. Sometimes Mary thought that the children mirrored her own feelings—that she herself felt she had wasted her time, perhaps lost a chance for something that might have made her life a little better.

Mary had become vastly more skilled at verbalizing than she was at making pottery. Her verbal skills gained applause and began to outdistance the technical skills

required to give reality to her ideas. Further, the verbalization of the work tended to remove the energy force behind actually doing it. After she had been so clear and skillful in her explanations of pottery to be done, how could she risk the muddle that the doing of it would bring? Mary had made a mistake in structuring into her semester off those periodic presentations. That should have been left for some time at the end of the term, when the discussion could follow the work rather than anticipate it. Such a situation occurs all too often in the lives of nonprofessional as well as professional artists.

John is a painter. He attended a well-known art academy, graduated at the top of his class, moved to New York, and began to carve out a career. He went to all the right parties, spent time at the Soho Bar, meeting other artists and gallery personnel, and soon was considered an up-and-coming young painter. He was articulate both about himself and about the “art scene,” so he walked in the air of great promise. When asked what he was up to at the moment, John would invariably describe work he was just beginning in such meaningful and electric terms that his listeners were tremendously impressed by his brilliance. Several important gallery directors told him to stop by when he had finished these pieces. In time, he received a grant, based on his well-written proposal and the connections he had developed. By now, nearly two years had elapsed since he had completed a piece. His proposals and descriptions of work-in-progress grew into artifices that he would need years of hard work to reach. His inventions completely outstripped his technical abilities and had come to seem a realm apart from what he had ever *done*. Rather than plug into the actual work at even this stage, trying to bring it up to others' expectations of it, he persisted in procrastination, relying instead upon more and more verbalizations. As things grew worse, he began to lie about his efforts, and even made believe he was withdrawing to work when in reality, he would be home reading and watching TV. John grew extremely guilty about his failure to satisfy the terms of his grant, and the guilt was covered by condescension towards others too weak to survive in the art world. Eventually, John left New York to take a job as an instructor of Painting at a small mid-Western school. He held the job for a year, then dropped out of sight.

Most college and university art departments encourage students to talk about their work. They must be able to argue and defend themselves in critiques, and to place their work in a tradition. This is a valuable asset for a professional artist. When he

leaves school to enter the art world, he will be called upon to defend his art before gallery owners, critics, and even other artists. For professional survival, verbal and conceptual skills are certainly worthy of development within the academy. Problems arise, however, when conceptual and verbal skills *replace* the abilities and emotional makeup for hard work. Out in the world, articulateness is rewarded with social acceptance, grants, teaching jobs, and critical attention. The work itself, done privately, with little or no reward or applause during those long painful hours, hardly gratifies someone seeking immediate approval. Such artists may be unwilling or unable to spend the time and energy required to bring the applauded concept to fruition.

Some of these artists return to the academy, where the ability to talk coincides nicely with the demands of teaching. They can, in turn, influence another generation of students. Others may become critics or art historians or arts administrators. Others, like John, may fritter away their time in bars, forever talking about that work they are just about to begin. The most persistent of them may be able to find a vehicle for their conceptualizations that allows them to sell that which does not exist.

What began as a well-meaning attempt by teachers, critics, and mature artists to get young artists to learn to speak about their work, to help them survive, and to help them understand themselves has become a danger to creative work. Excesses, like Manifestoes, some forms of Conceptual Art, and granting agencies that reward verbal skills, tend to interpose the words for the work described, and to separate the artist from his material.

There are too many blocks related to such problems, too many artists like John whose work has long since evaporated, and who are reticent to reenter a real creative commitment lest they prove to others and to themselves the paucity of that commitment. A resumption of activity would take many hours of self-analysis and the kind of criticism not offered in circles of mutual applause.

The prevention of hot air is simple. Only talk about what you *have* done. Refrain from verbalizations about what you *will* do or *are* doing whether in a public manifesto or a private conversation. Such things not only divert the energy, they tie you into structures that may not be as creatively valid as they seemed intellectually compelling. If you talk about what you will do, this is a danger sign that you are drifting away from your center. Stop talking and get back to work with much more intensity, or risk losing

it. Remember always that it is the work that endures long after you, the critics, and historians are gone.

B. UNDEVELOPED WORK

JOYCE WORKED AS AN EDITOR FOR a large New York publishing house. As the company grew, and as she had been given more and more responsibility, she found that the level of completion expected of her editing decreased. The Managing Editor required Joyce to complete a job in one week that she used to do in two or three, and he appeared quite ready to accept a slight drop in quality in exchange for a greater amount of work completed. Joyce thought at first that she could speed up her work without a loss of care, but lately she found that what may have been a "slight" loss to her editor was intolerable to her. Even working on her own time, in the evenings, Joyce couldn't maintain the same standards as before. She tried to discuss the problem with her superiors, but, although she found them sympathetic, they had made their own adaptations to the business and felt she should make hers. She had always needed to derive her greatest fulfillment from her work, from the full and intensive process and from the final knowledge of a job completed in the best way she knew how. Her frustration at unfinished work grew to the point at which she had to leave the company. She tried a smaller house, with a smaller paycheck, and hoped to stay in the field. If this had not worked, she was prepared to try something else. One thing she knew, whatever she was to do must be in a situation in which the best she could do was what was wanted.

How many creative people labor in situations in which the only kind of work one has time and energy to complete is undeveloped work? How many painters are continuing to turn out saleable work that has long outlived the painter's real creative impetus to do so? How many writers still turn out unfinished manuscripts just to make a publisher's deadline for a Fall List or to capitalize on a topical event? How many of us just get the job done to get it done, sacrificing the care and sense of commitment that can give us the lift of feeling it was the best we could have done?

Undeveloped work is the "stuff" that emerges without proper germination or commitment. It arrives without body and without spirit. It arrives simply because *we*

will it so. The occasions are usually external: because a publisher demands some piece of material, because a gallery owner or a customer offers us an opportunity for a show or a sale, because a client wants full-blown copy by yesterday. We begin hoping that just the willful initiation of the effort will elicit some acceptable result. The work, as it emerges, seems dry and stillborn. At the time, we may tell ourselves that this is “all right” or “good enough,” although under ordinary circumstances, the work would never pass muster. We may honestly feel that if we pursue this track, the commitment and intensity will come of its own accord, but going on, it becomes more difficult to maintain the illusion that the work will ever be anything more than “all right.” Should we continue to work or decline the job or put it aside until the time is ripe? Or—and this is the difficult choice—is the tendency to put the work away, the beginning of a block?!

This is an extremely confusing problem. You can be so concerned with confronting procrastination and work blocks that you force yourself into creative position, do the preliminary exercises, and will yourself to work at something until it is finished. Finished it may be but not felt, not real. The problem is not so much in the willing, as what is being willed. If the motive is external—money, fame, hope of favorable criticism, adherence to a grant proposal—then there is only a chance that the product of the will may happen to harmonize with your inner direction. Of course, that connection, between our inner direction and the work pursued, has a much greater chance of success when the will is harnessed to inner necessity.

There have been artists who could make potboiler art, that gained the money and recognition, but this art was totally different from the products of pure expression. These artists split their creative lives into two, doing art for the marketplace, and another work for themselves. If such a division does not cause depression, or a block, then the individual has no reason to change his ways. On the other hand, many artists turn to their more “serious work” after turning out the market work and find themselves exhausted, dried out, unable to reconnect with their source.

If you find yourself continually forcing yourself to produce, consider simply dropping it for a while, and go on to something that emerges from an idea unrelated to what is demanded of you. In recapturing your center, you may well find that you have gained renewed connection to the previously undeveloped work and can approach it from a new angle. On the other hand, you may find that the new effort becomes far

more significant to you, and that you no longer think about the undeveloped work. If an external pressure is in the picture, such as a deadline for the older work, and if you are truly involved in the newer work, you might try a reasonable proposal to the gallery, the granting office, or the publisher, that you are now committed to work that is different from but more dynamic than the older work. You may find that your newer project excites those others, too, and that the feelings of pressure were misguided.

If it turns out, however, that your patron is inflexible, you must decide whether to continue forcing yourself to produce or honorably to end the contract and accept the losses. A reasonable compromise would be to do your best to complete this one contracted work, and know that you cannot pursue such a thing again in the future.

One issue should be clarified here—that of gaining renewed connection to undeveloped work by veering off into freer, more personal work. A change in direction may establish a distance and new perspective on undeveloped projects, opening up options that are exciting while still fulfilling the original contract.

C. FEAR OF COMPLETION

Some artists seem to work forever on a project. What looks to be finished, is worked and reworked to get it “just right.” Deadlines are missed, publishers, art galleries, and granting agencies are besieged with requests for extensions, and the artist goes on polishing, sometime undoing and redoing the work. It seems awkward to call such a thing a creative block, because, indeed, the artist seems to be working to capacity. It's just that the work never seems to go forward enough. Rather than a block, this could be considered a “circumvention.” The best term I can think of is a “Penelope Maneuver.”

In Homer's *Odyssey*, Ulysses' wife, Penelope, left alone for years by her husband's voyage throughout the world, was finally pressured into choosing a new husband from among a number of suitors. Loyal to her husband, Penelope obviously wished to avoid this choice as long as possible, so she promised that she would select a suitor only when she had finished her tapestry. After weaving all day under the watchful eyes of her suitors, in the evening Penelope would secretly unravel the day's work. Effectively managing this maneuver for months, Penelope was able to keep her suitors at bay until Ulysses' arrival.

The Penelope Maneuver serves as a vehicle for the artist to avoid the moment of completion, the moment that the work must separate from his hands and go off into the world to be possessed, judged, loved, and hated by others. Although most artists feel some pleasure at the moment of completion of a project, feeling that they have made a mark upon the universe and that they have done so through no small amount of perseverance and painful work, all feel some ambivalence about finishing. For one thing, refinement actually could go on forever. Additionally, because artists grow and change continuously, a stage of completion that may have seemed right one week, may not seem right a week later.

The artist should be able to look into himself to understand whether his need for perfection is predominant, or whether his fear of completion is the important factor. Those who nurture their perfectionism often have difficulty gaining material support from the world. To mitigate perfectionism, it is helpful to focus on your entire body of work. Greater growth is possible from one work to the next, than from one late stage of a work to its later stage. Then the desire to finish with one project and explore a new idea should begin to override the need to make the first work perfect. This same consideration, of process, should also help those artists whose failure to complete a work points more to their fear of the consequences vis-à-vis the world. First of all, such an artist should try to understand the fear, to work out what would be the *very worst* that could happen. Then, even the worst can be effectively prevented by reasonable precautions. But in many cases, simply fantasizing the worst is enough to release the fear.

Below are offered a number of exercises to develop “completionary” powers. Some may work for you, others may not, and additional ones may occur to you as you read. The important thing is to ease up, see your work as part of a corpus and yourself as growing:

- 1) Look over all your old work and see how each work led to the next, continually developing and growing. On the basis of all you've seen, write down a few things you wish to develop in future works, things that you may not yet have satisfactorily solved. Now go back to your current work, finish it as best you can at this point, and go on to the next stage.

- 2) While trying to complete a project, take a couple of hours off. Take a pad and a pencil and go for a nice walk to a park or in the woods, but *relax*. Now, for an hour, write down as many ideas for the future as you can.
- 3) With a tape-recorder, pen, or a typewriter, record a dialogue between yourself and a voice that talks against completing your work. Allow that voice to argue coherently and persuasively, giving all the reasons that you should not finish. Now, let your voice answer his reasons one by one. Continue arguing with the voice, allowing it the floor for a few moments, always jumping in to combat it.
- 4) Create a catastrophic story about what will happen when you do finish the work and it enters the world. Build up the moments of ruthless criticisms and ostracism, all that your imagination can create. See just how extreme you can make this case.

D. EXHAUSTION

YOU HAVE JUST FINISHED AN EXTENDED WORK. In your concentration, you neglected eating and sleeping. The surges of adrenalin let you ignore the physical deterioration that developed underneath the excitement. Once the work is completed, you feel weak, headache, and your stomach is pounding.

Aside from the physical ravages of concentrated effort, there is also a post-creative depression, similar to post-partum depression. This depression may be mistakenly interpreted as being physically "run down."

After completion of the work, there is suddenly nothing before you—a kind of emptiness. Even if you have another project, you must necessarily begin again at the beginning. This emptiness, coupled with even mild depression and physical weakness, can be quite unpleasant. This feeling is quite common. It is part of the ebb and flow of creativity and passes in time.

Sleeplessness is a real problem. Working to capacity, we may not wish to interrupt work or to lose a feeling, a mood, or an idea. However, sleep is not just a healer, but also a creative tool. *Creative Dreaming*, by Dr. Patricia Garfield, is a

pioneering book that popularized for western culture what people in the East have known for centuries—that we can use and mold our dreams so that they can educate and nurture us. Artists can use dreaming to work out creative problems, get new ideas, and integrate fragments into a whole. There is no need to treat sleep as an interruption or impediment, and every reason to be creative in dreaming—thereby gaining the physical benefits as well as the artistic collaboration of sleep.

Think about what it really means to complete something, to end it. Remember the other endings in life moving from one place to another, terminating a relationship, graduation from school, the death of a friend or relative. Try to recapture the feeling of loss, experience the sorrow, cry if you can. Each post-creative depression carries with it echoes of all past endings and moments of emptiness. It is always better to experience loss than to deny it or to run from the emptiness to drugs, alcohol, sex, or even orgies of food. Accept the depression and permit yourself to experience it. You will connect more deeply to yourself, and will be able more meaningfully to weave together the strands of the next germinating work.

Some artists integrate the completed piece into their body of work. The act of photographing a painting or sculpture and placing the slides in a portfolio places that work in a continuum. A writer rereading past works and seeing developing themes and elements of growth may assuage the depression, as may a dancer or director who views tapes of past performances.

Many people follow a period of intense work with a vacation. You are separated from the studio, the telephone, and visitors, and you may feel that you've left the work rather than that the work has left you. You are substituting a feeling of willfulness for passivity. A vacation may be just the thing to gain a new perspective on that last work and on your creative work in general.

It is also important to reestablish contact with family, friends, and professional associates. Especially if the work was accompanied by social withdrawal, personal reconnections may prove difficult. But sharing and communicating with others often replaces the emptiness with the ritual offering of a gift of self.

Ambitious professionals, who set up deadlines far in advance, may allow no leeway, no resting time between works. Exhausted after project No. 1, you're unable to carry out the deadlines of No. 2. Remember, you are only human and have your own

bodily and psychic rhythms. By learning them, you may well ensure your continued productivity for a long time.

E. DEPRESSION

DEPRESSION IS A COMPLAINT SUFFERED by creative people. It can occur again and again for periods of from a single day to weeks or even months. The artist grows physically weaker and weaker, so that even walking to the corner store takes a tremendous effort, and this is made more severe by a growing feeling of hopelessness. He may engage in self-destructive actions like drug or alcohol abuse, divorce, quitting jobs, destruction of objects, even physical destruction of self.

CYCLIC DEPRESSION

While depression associated with drug use and the depression attending exhaustion can be dealt with straightforwardly (albeit with difficulty), cyclic depression is more elusive and seems even to have a life of its own. A cyclic depression may be preceded by a rejection as much as by a success, or it may follow a period of intense and productive work. Hence it seems to others as if the depression were an "overreaction" to rejection, or an "inability" to cope with success, or simple post-creative exhaustion. However, it may also be an artist's germination period, in which he is freeing himself of past emotional, artistic, and personal connections to make way for new, more highly developed ones. This is by nature, a very painful, lonely process, and it carries with it the risk, always, that bridges will be burned for the sake of an unknown, which may prove to be an illusion.

As the artist grows older, aspects of his life and work give him more and more pleasure and fulfillment. It becomes increasingly difficult to risk their loss in further steps of growth, and many artists refuse to recognize the depression as a prelude to forward-movement with concomitant loss. They evade their feelings, which in turn only prolongs the depression.

Cyclic depressions must be seen as a kind of cleansing, a preparing of the way for receptivity to new modes of feeling, thinking, acting, and creating. Fragmentation and loss, alienation and failure, can then be put into a more positive perspective. As

they come periodically, they are signs that the next stage of growth awaits. This way of thinking prevents self-castigation, and forestalls criticism by others. It also keeps the depression within appropriate boundaries and perspective, reducing the chances of the depression broadening into more self-destructive behavior. Aware of the therapeutic role of the depression, an artist may work with it instead of against it.

Here are some exercises to help you through depression:

- 1) By writing or speaking into a tape-recorder, develop the strength of all the voices within you who are unhappy with your work and your life. The faster and more thoroughly you can search out the bottom of your despair, the faster and more thoroughly can you begin to rebuild from it.
- 2) If you have been thinking about your death, you might try imagining within yourself, or on paper, what it would be like, step by step, for you to die. What would you feel as you were dying, how would you feel about your life behind you, about the work you left? Friends and family? Feel the emptiness, the peace, and the space of death. Then imagine that you have been given another chance to live and that you can change your life any way you wish. Elaborate on the elements of that life.
- 3) Don't be so disgusted with what you have written or communicated that you destroy it. Save it in an envelope clearly marked "DEPRESSION" and put it in an easily accessible place. Take it down next time you're depressed so that you can remember you were there before and that you pulled yourself out of it renewed. Keep adding to this file each time you go through this cleansing, and keep rereading it each time.
- 4) A number of art works make good company in sadness and despair: Mozart's Requiem mass, Beethoven's 14th String Quartet, Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*. Find those works that provide company for you at these times.
- 5) This is one of the best ways to gain control over depression. When your friends and colleagues are going through a depression you feel is similar to

yours, try to help them through it. Remind them that their feelings are normal, and ultimately positive, that they are lucky to be so open to the process of change, and that they will soon arrive at a state more fulfilling and happier than what they had known before. Do *not* glibly remind them of their accomplishments, and tell them they have no reason at all to be depressed. Help them cleanse themselves of those “accomplishments” as well as the defeats. Acknowledge their feelings *as real*, but beautiful and growthful.

- 6) It is sometimes helpful in cyclic depression to create support groups dealing with just this process, so that the vision of coming out of the fragmentation into a new and clearer level of creativity is continually before the artist as he moves through despair.
- 7) At times of depression, it is usually inconceivable that the artist create the same work, in the same style, as before. This does not mean, however, that no work is possible during this time. At the very least, the more mechanical, busy details of work may be undertaken like stretching canvasses, cleaning a camera. This helps to focus on the general issues of the art form of which these details are so much a part.
- 8) Sometimes an artist who is repelled by the normal work routine during a depression suddenly finds himself creating a work expressing his despair. Such a work may transcend all that he has done when in high spirits. Despair, sadness, and solitude were certainly a significant element in 19th century Romantic works. If we mourn the excesses of Romanticism, we also mourn the 20th century reaction that holds as *sentimental* the artistic expression of *anything but* anger, sex, violence, wit, or cold reason. This reaction, and its influence upon us, often discourages a contemporary artist from giving a meaningful artistic form to his depression.

Above all, you should remind yourself that what you are experiencing is positive, that the pain has a transcendent purpose. Each depression you live through gives greater credibility to the assurance that you will do so yet again. The means chosen for

working with depression will develop more effectiveness with each cycle until at last growth will predominate over despair. BOOKMARK

DEPRESSION AS A SYMPTOM OF CONFLICT

As more and more people turn to the arts for fulfillment outside their normal life styles, there is sometimes evident a kind of depression that results from strains in this duality. Bill, for years a successful stockbroker, took a sculpture course in the evening division of the local community college. Although he signed up for the course because a friend had suggested that working with clay might release some of the tensions of his work, Bill soon grew to love the medium. He would look forward to each class, arriving early to dig his hands into the clay before anyone else had come into the room. The joy he was feeling in the studio brought into contrast the lack of connection he had been feeling to his job, and Bill began to feel a bit depressed about his life. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but he knew that the highest points of the week were in the studio, tracing his fingers over the ridges of the clay, giving form to what a moment before had been an amorphous mass.

Emily had seen herself as an ideal wife and mother for fifteen years and she felt that she had been totally fulfilled in those roles. Now that the kids had social lives so much more independent from her and Bob, Emily decided to take up a hobby. She had always wanted to learn how to do landscapes paintings and have a reason for those long walks in the country so she enrolled in a painting course at the community center. Within a month, something seemed to take hold of her, and she just couldn't get enough time to paint. She began staying after class to finish her projects and couldn't wait for the weekends to take her canvases into the countryside. She quickly filled up all her free time with her new hobby and began to push up against the time usually spent on the household duties or with the family. Bob seemed to understand and at first encouraged her new hobby. The kids enjoyed seeing Emily's new works and were proud of their mother's newfound talent. Little things began to happen, however, that made it clear to Emily that the family saw her painting as a hobby that would indeed be secondary to her usual care of them. Because Emily was only beginning to paint (she didn't dare call herself a "painter"), she couldn't presume to use her hobby as a reason not to have the dinner ready for everyone in the evening or not to spend most of the weekend preparing a cocktail party for some of Bob's clients. Just the same, Emily grew

irritated and then depressed that things had become so complicated. Standing there with a martini in her hands, trying to make charming conversation with someone she really didn't care about, she now couldn't help thinking that she *could* be sitting on a river bank painting the soft under edge of a passing cloud. Emily wanted her family to be happy, however, so she kept her feelings to herself.

Within a few months, Emily's external life had stabilized. She went to class twice a week and spent Sunday mornings out in the country by herself. The rest of the time, she was there for her family. Everyone thought she was quite happy and went on about their lives. The price of that external stabilization was a growing depression that Emily tried in vain to deny. She had come to a critical point in her life in uncovering real needs that she was having difficulty integrating into her traditional life style. What she *really* wanted was to spend much more time painting, taking additional courses, maybe even enrolling in a real program at the University, but she didn't know how to do this and still keep her family just the way it was. The depression was the result of an ineffective integration.

Both Emily and Bill had come to critical points in their lives. What had begun as pleasant hobbies had quickly grown into real fulfillment. The demands of their lives did not easily permit either person to develop their hobbies into something more. This "something more" was ambiguous. Neither Emily nor Bill would have dared dream of art as a "profession" even at some future point in time. But there was a long continuum between a little hobby and a profession, and each needed to explore his/her own progress along that continuum. At the simplest level, each person was having a tremendous amount of fun at creating art and wanted to have more time and energy at that fun. At a more complicated level, each person found that in pursuing that art form there were parts of them expressed and fulfilled that had been previously untapped. Once tapped, these parts cried out for greater and greater release, seeming to run into conflict with the otherwise nicely woven lives of Emily and Bill.

The depression each felt could be seen as a symptom of the underlying conflict. Awareness of this conflict could have led to attempts to solve it. In Bill's case, the solution seemed to involve not only more time devoted to sculpture but also a more radical job change. The risks involved in such change kept Bill from facing his growing conflict. He began to drink a little more and, eventually, he gave up his sculpture, considering it a nice temporary kind of therapy that was no longer so useful. He's still

working on the Exchange, seemingly content, but when he's had a few drinks with a good friend, he tends to grow sad. He begins to talk about some day throwing it all in and just going out to the woods to sculpt.

Emily was encouraged to talk about her growing needs with her family, and she found them surprisingly understanding. In fact, seeing her so committed and happy at painting, Bob was inspired to try his hand at photography and now both spend whole weekends in the country. Emily doesn't spend so much time cooking the dinners anymore—the teenagers like to cook exotic dishes.

Many of us come to critical points in our lives at which some change is called for. Change brings risk, and so we hesitate to make it. Some of us hesitate even to admit to ourselves the need for it. Depression may be the signal that we have to attend to the need for change. Such critical points may come a number of times in our lives as we uncover varying needs. With artists, these points seem to come a bit more often, more severely. They must be recognized and coped with as identity crises.

F. IDENTITY CRISES

Judy had pursued a multitude of artistic styles as a painter in her twenties. She took dance classes, travelled quite a bit, and had relationships with many men. At twenty-nine, she became depressed because nothing had amounted to much. She hadn't the patience or will to work out a relationship with one man past the beginnings of conflict and boredom, and she had not persisted in a single creative work long enough to bring it to a level of full and satisfactory development. She suddenly felt alone, cut off from people and from herself, and remembered expectations she had had of herself and of her work when she was younger. She finally chose to give up all activities except painting, support herself by teaching, and work through a relationship with a man she had just met.

By the time Judy was thirty-nine, her painting career had grown and she was very pleased with the work she was doing. She had been married to Harry, a writer, for five years and was committed to improving that marriage. However, she was suddenly overwhelmed by the need to express herself in more ways than painting. She felt that writing might have endangered her relationship with Harry and the momentum of her

painting career, but the depression and sense of incompleteness forced her to make the changes. She was a reasonable woman and did not burn bridges. She started writing articles on art for small magazines, and she was soon as fulfilled by her writing as by her painting. Through sheer perseverance, she managed to continue developing her painting at the same time that she wrote.

At 53, her paintings were considered "blue-chip." Her writing, regularly published in significant journals, was respected. Judy suddenly sunk into a depression and could not understand why. She had gained everything she had sought: career and a fulfilling marriage. She realized then that she wanted to change the kind of work she had been doing, that it no longer reflected her feelings. She knew that this would bring her rejection and confusion in the art world, which had come to respect and understand a particular style she had developed. Unwilling to persist in that style, to copy herself, she began the slow torturous process of developing a new kind of work. Similarly, college teaching no longer felt right. There was no longer a mesh between what she had to give and what others needed to receive. She experimented for a summer, giving a workshop for underprivileged children in a nearby ghetto. This was all she could continue to think about when she returned to the college. She searched out funding for a permanent workshop in the ghetto and resigned from the faculty, accepting the risks of the step-by-step building of the workshop over the security of a tenured faculty position—only for the sake of what she felt was right for her.

Judy's story is an oversimplified version of a composite picture of realities. The tone of each crisis was real, but the fluidity with which she dealt with each crisis was idealized. Most people twist through their lives not only because they are not willing to make changes until emergencies arise, but also because they may not be aware of what they really want. The crisis occurs because we operate under an automatic pilot set some time ago to achieve a goal. But we are ever-changing human beings, and the goals change as well.

A crisis is another way of calling for an *emergency change*. Many artists are able, by their own efforts, to lessen the impact of these traditional crisis points, by virtue of their continual search for the truth within them. Artists can even use crises as inspiration for greater surges of creative work.

Several difficulties related to these crises are especially acute for artists. First, resistance to change *in all people* is due primarily to insecurity, fear of loss for what one

does have. Insofar as an artist must struggle excessively to achieve material success, it is therefore doubly hard to risk its loss by giving way to a great change in his or her life. The only motivation to change is the greater pain of being out-of-synch with oneself. Others' accounts of their turmoil may console you at these times. The diaries of people like Kafka, Van Gogh, Klee, Hesse, and Gide, who faced similar crises, can by identification lead you through your own and give you the feeling that you are not so alone, that others have gone before you. It is also helpful to look back over diaries and notes that *you* wrote in times of struggle, when you were just starting out from a previous point of change, in all its insecurity. In this way, you can see how far you've come, you can remember the pain, and know that it lessened and that the pain you feel now will lessen as well. Once you commit yourself to change and leave the old persona behind you, a great burst of energy and sense of fullness comes to sustain you through the unknown.

So many forms of worldly success are self-limiting. Only by moving according to the dictates of your own artistic conscience, regardless of the risks, can you steer clear of these crises. And only by knowing yourself, can you hold the wheel firmly in your hands.

G. GROWING OLD

THE PROFESSIONAL ARTIST

Ron is a photographer in his sixties. He became well known in his youth for both his photographs and his documentary films. For many years, he felt a part of the avant-garde, living in New York, attending all the openings and meetings in the bars with his colleagues. Gradually, after he turned fifty, he saw younger generations of photographers replacing those of his own generation in the shows and journals. One by one, his friends left New York to take teaching jobs in the mid-west or just to move to the countryside somewhere to take life easier. Finally, Ron himself moved to New England with his wife. He continued to practice his craft, but his contacts with the New York scene dissolved in time, he stopped writing to his old friends across the country, and he and his wife settled into an increasingly cocoon existence.

From time to time, Ron sent his work out, hoping to have a show, but it always returned with a polite letter of rejection. When he was in his late fifties, Ron found their savings running out and he took part time work teaching photography at the local community college. It paid the bills and got him out of the house relating more to people, but Ron grew irritated over the low level of commitment his students felt about their work. When he tried to push them further, he sensed that they saw him as a has-been. He started to look ahead a few years and worried about whether he or Joyce would get sick and whether the normal Medicare would be enough to cover the bills. He kept at his photography, but not quite as seriously as he once did. He grew tired more easily, and experienced a periodic fear that what he was doing may not have been of value anymore. He gave up sending his work out, and spent more time watching TV and working in the garden than in the darkroom. He felt a growing emptiness and was helpless to do anything about it. Sometimes, now in his sixties, he goes through his work of forty years ago, looks hard at it, and wonders whether it was any good at all. He searches in vain through contemporary books on the history of photography for even a mention of his name. He knows he has been forgotten, and he begins himself to forget both his earlier dreams and what he had really achieved.

Ron presents us with a depressing picture. It's not always this way and *it need not be this way*. An understanding of the issues involved with an artist's growing old may help to prepare us for what could be a beautiful and rewarding time of life.

There are definite changes an artist undergoes as he or she grows into the later years—physiological and psychological. In this youth-dominated culture, art which is vigorous, exciting, and new holds sway. Artists of all ages who lack these elements are at a competitive disadvantage when it comes to exhibition, distribution, and support. This in turn goads older artists, who have outgrown such youthful feelings, either to withdraw or to simulate and express a state of mind that is no longer valid for them. Usually such an artist not only fails to simulate the commercially viable work, but he also damages his connection to his own true development.

Those who withdraw are handicapped by a feeling of being on the outside looking in. Many artists lucky enough to survive throughout their later years in full and honest creativity have maintained and nurtured relationships with other artists, both younger and contemporary.

Some artists reach old age with their work established, and with a market receptive to everything that they do. More usually, an artist has grown famous through a particular style that, in old age, he has outgrown. His blue-chip status pressures him to continue the former style or risk loss of support. Only giants like Picasso can gain acceptance *no matter what they create*. Others, whose styles change in accordance with their growth into old age, such as Rembrandt and Beethoven, face tremendous rejection by both the public and the critical establishment.

Many of the traditional stimulants, such as alcohol and drugs, become more and more self-defeating, even dangerous in old age. Liver damage, heart failure, and neurological disorders become real worries, and people who have not learned how to create and live without these dependencies are now so chronically addicted that work without them is virtually unthinkable. Even those who have lived in moderation may find that the body cannot keep up the same pace. All-nighters drain off too much energy. Deadlines are no longer so much of a challenge as they are a hindrance to creative work. Criticism seems to hurt more, and for longer reverberating periods of time, and in advanced age, memory becomes selective.

As the artist ages, his friends and colleagues begin to leave him. Some leave the field for more secure lives, others move away, and many die as the years pass, leaving the older artist more and more alone with his work and his memories. Loneliness and feelings of alienation can become acute in some, and may lead to exploitation of the artist's needs by others wishing to use him for career entree. This in turn can lead to paranoia.

Unless the senior artist has been granted teaching tenure, or has produced work of blue-chip status, his financial condition tends to deteriorate. His ability to carry out, and his will to pursue survival jobs decreases, and fixed incomes such as social security cannot sustain the growing expenses of his life and his work (This is especially true of the visual artist who must buy supplies). He tends to make do with older clothes which may make him feel out of fashion. He must stay away from restaurants and expensive bars, where professional groups congregate, and where he would have the best chance for the contacts with which to push his work back into the arena. And he must reduce the options available for reinvigorating vacations.

Artists who are divorced or widowed, find it more and more difficult as they years go on to find suitable partners. Women artists especially find their options more

and more limited, and both women and men find that the only solution in loneliness may be encouraging others to exploit them.

Medicare is available to all over sixty-five, but artists, because of their peripheral position in society, are often not eligible for the group insurance plans that supplement State care and must settle for minimum hospital care. And, since many artists—a disproportionate number—have chosen to have no children, they cannot look to this traditional form of security for aid when they are sick or otherwise helpless. The problems seem insurmountable, and the picture looks grim indeed. The issue becomes even more severe for dancers and actors whose “old age” for all practical purposes begins in their mid-thirties. This picture, in all its starkness, is the specter held up to the potential artist in childhood by worried, but well-meaning parents. And this is not to mention the artists dying in sickness, insanity, and poverty even *before* they reach old age.

These are all real problems. All senior artists must face one or more of them. If we are lucky enough to age while still calling ourselves “artists,” we too will someday face them.

It is never too early to think about what it might be like later, and to plan for it. This includes artist group-disability insurance, private retirement plans, savings accounts, and stock investments. More importantly, it means coming to terms emotionally with the changes of life and creative style that growth and aging may have in store for us. Notice I put the word, “growth” together with aging. Something so evident in non-Western cultures must be spelled out in our own, for this is the key to optimal coping with growing older—a way of looking at ourselves that is both true and positive. Causes of senility are as yet unproved, but we have all known elderly people whose minds began to deteriorate *after* their active and committed lives ground to a halt through forced retirement. Giving in to a confused society's view of old age creates a self-fulfilling prophecy of inactivity, inferiority, and waste. It is self-defeating to try to like disco dancing and hard rock music in the mistaken belief that it will make you feel young again. The older you are, the greater your capacity to understand fully Beethoven's late quartets or Mozart's Requiem mass, and to gain affirmation from them.

It is self-defeating and dishonest to simulate the immediate here-and-nowness, or even the futurism of industrial society and its culture, when your real propensities may be towards an overview of life and history that scans decades as mere days. The

greatest social security is continual adherence to the sense of self. Keep to this with integrity, and old age will be merely a continuance of growth. You will draw to yourself those people who will support you and nurture you, because you will remain capable of nurturing them in return. Your work will find outlets perhaps not as flashy as those for "youth art," but nevertheless as sustaining. And as you move into seniority, with self-respect and confidence in your inner self, you may well find that the material rewards and physical pleasures, which do diminish, are nevertheless of less account than your own inner and creative growth, and that there is a certain beauty and symmetry to the slow abdication from your former needs in favor of more universal and lasting ones.

THE AMATEUR

In an earlier chapter, I briefly mentioned the work of Don, a sculptor, with senior citizens in Northern Vermont. The project, called G.R.A.C.E., has guided a number of elderly men and women to begin or return to painting, sculpture, and crafts as a hobby for their senior years. What seems most amazing to me is the extent to which those people have been able to use their works as vehicles for remembering. Using little bits of shells and colored pebbles, one artist is able to reconstruct almost exactly the landscape in which he grew up. Another artist is able with oils to capture the look of the inside of the home in which she was born and lived for only a few years.

The project has been going on for nearly ten years, and these artists have put together a body of work so vibrant and real that its tour throughout the US has inspired other senior citizens to turn off the TV and turn to some form of creative expression.

I knew an elderly retired physician in California who spends most of his time creating delightful doodles of characters in different positions. He drew the doodles on long narrow strips of paper, which he then sent to friends and friends of friends as bookmarks. There is a retired farmer in Central Vermont who spends his time carving birds with full wingspreads, each feather individually rendered. And when I was in Austria a few years back, a retired ironworker named Hans smiled when he found out I was an artist and humbly led me down to the basement to show me the multitude of swirling designs in iron he had welded together now that he was no longer paid to make tools.

There is a great potential for creative work from all our senior citizens. There is so much energy, so many memories, so much love and gentleness that can be tapped

and expressed for the rest of us. In a country like Bulgaria, which treats its senior citizens with respect and understanding, there are state-sponsored creative activities and classes in many senior centers. We owe it to ourselves as a society to encourage the arts for our seniors. If every man and woman who thought of themselves as an “artist” would spend just one hour a month working with senior citizens, not only would we be contributing greatly to the beauty of old age, but we would be giving ourselves the opportunity of learning and remembering and loving.

APPENDIX

WARM-UP EXERCISES

OVER THE YEARS, A NUMBER OF EXERCISES have proved effective in preparing both professional and beginning artists for the mental flexibility and determination necessary for prolonged creative work. Some of those described are fairly common and may already be part of your life; others may be new to you. In exploring these exercises, you may open up a reservoir of innovative behavior that may, in turn, ease the transition to the more difficult tasks ahead of you.

A. FINDING THE CHILD

PLAY UNDERLIES ALL ART, no matter how “serious.” The imagination of the child who can impart to any inanimate object a life all its own, is something to be cherished and maintained. The child need not interpret, analyze, or criticize. For him, everything simply *is*. Everything is to be wondered at, played with, enjoyed. The greatest artists have often seemed like children to their families and friends, but it is that childlike wonder underlying the inspiration of their work. Below are a series of exercises that should help you return to that child within.

- 1) Go to a toy store and watch the children as they look at and touch the toys. When you've gotten yourself sufficiently in the mood, go through the aisles yourself, looking at all the bright colors. Push buttons and levers and listen to the sounds. As you play, think of all the toys you may have had in your own childhood. Imagine how you now might design some of the toys in the store to make them even better.

- 2) Go to the children's book department and look through the books. If you remember a favorite book you had as a child, see if it's on the shelf or in the *In Print Catalog*. If you can get your hands on it, hold it, smell it, look through it. Has it changed? Have you changed? Take this book or even a new one home, crawl under the covers at night and read.
- 3) If you don't already have them, go out and buy some little dolls, stuffed animals, or figurines. Arrange them on your bed or on a shelf. From time to time, change their positions so they can all get to know each other. Add other materials to the environment.
- 4) Remember the arts and crafts activities you did as a child and try a few again. Build model planes, cars, and dinosaurs, carve soap, weave potholders, and burn designs into wood. Make little clay ashtrays or papier-mâché masks. Paint pictures on your windows for Halloween and Christmas. Create aluminum foil animals, paper dolls, and tin-can drums.
- 5) Watch children. Study their facial gestures and their body movements as they play. Try to imitate them when you get home, and begin your work with these gestures and movements.

Put aside your professional work for the moment and try to use childlike activities as a bridge to a childlike modality of your art form. After reading children's books, a painter might try a crayon drawing. After listening to a few sing-along records or playing with some stuffed animals, a musician might pick up a toy slide whistle and begin to "mess around" with it. A dancer might end up moving as a child who works in a sand box. Find the child within you and reconnect with the sense of fun that will bring excitement to your work.

B. PLAYING WITH ART

IT OFTEN HAPPENS THAT AN ART FORM becomes too laden with internalized judgments of good and bad. When this happens, the work becomes deadly to perform and it may be of value for you to return to the roots of your creativity by “playing” in a new art form in which you are an amateur, someone of no interest at all to a critic. You are then free to relax and to have fun.

You could take a class in an entirely different art form. You could also begin a new art form all by yourself. Begin to sing to yourself while driving down the highway, write little poems on napkins, draw sketches on toilet paper, make sculptures out of sand or snow. All these efforts, even the materials, should be non-professional. As you search within your memories and fantasies for those special things, you might try a few of the activities that have proved inspiring for others.

- 1) If you are especially bothered by some particular noise, use it as a musical sound, integrating it into a more beautiful sound by humming, singing or playing an instrument along with it.
- 2) If you have a pet, watch it for a while. Then imitate the movements as best you can, accompanying the animal.
- 3) If a holiday or someone's birthday is near, make a card to send, in whatever materials remind you of the person.
- 4) Think of the most offensive words others have used to describe your work. Make up a little poem that repeats the words as many times as possible.
- 5) Place a little memo scroll and pen and pencils by the phone and, whenever you're speaking, doodle, write words, numbers, and made-up language.
- 6) If you have a telephone answering machine, have fun with your messages. Sing, use musical or sound effects backgrounds, invent various characters to speak the message. Encourage callers to improvise their messages in innovative ways.

- 7) At parties for your children, or for your friends, make little characters with apple heads, raisin eyes, and dried apricot mouths. Float fruit sculptures on the punch. Draw designs on napkins, and invent your own noisemakers.
- 8) Rearrange one of your rooms. Take all the furniture out of it and then put it back one piece at a time, each in a different place. Place different things on the walls and shelves.
- 9) Go to a toy store and buy a lot of toy musical instruments. Come home and play them. At the next party, give guests each a toy instrument and have them jam.
- 10) Put on some pop music and get your old typewriter out of the closet. Now, forgetting that the keys stand for letters, type in such a way as to keep the beat of the music. Use all the different sounds available on the typewriter.

C. WALKING, DRIVING, RIDING

WALKING: Many artists have their studios separate from the home *primarily* because they enjoy the walk to the studio as inspiration. Artists living in the country can take walks up a mountain, through the woods, or into town. Artists living in the city walk to the market or shopping center, to the park, or just along any street looking at store windows or people passing by. A walk is a good way to get exercise and good circulation (to the brain as well as to the heart). The walk can parallel your thought processes. If you are meditating and a tiny bit 'spacey', you walk very slowly, with no goal. On the other hand, if you feel you are near a creative breakthrough and need only the stamina and courage to make that final push, walk briskly, towards a destination. Feel yourself pass the memory of your own limits. A new technique or medium may be strengthened and given more direction by a walk to a familiar place by an entirely new route. At the very least, you can tell yourself the exercise is good for you, that you need the release. The idea you're seeking might just come to you as you're walking, if you remain open to it.

DRIVING: Driving alone, on a beautiful highway or country road, is private, meditative, and relaxing. There are times behind the wheel when you suddenly realize you've forgotten you were even driving. You were deep in thought about something else, while your "other self" was handling the wheel.

It sometimes helps to have a cassette recorder so that you can talk to yourself. Begin a monologue on a topic as prosaic as the drive itself. It can lead to other issues. Humming, singing, and whistling also have their place. Keep a sketchpad, some clay, or a camera in the car so that if the spirit moves you, you can pull over and record a thought. You may find that in time your car becomes an adjunct to the studio.

RIDING: Riding means sitting in a moving vehicle as someone else drives. While you give up the self-determination of driving, you can have a more meditative experience, one that permits free use of the hands. Buses, trains, planes, and ships (sometimes even subways and streetcars) are conducive not only to thinking and planning but also to actual work. The sitting position may govern the kind of thinking that emerges. Facing in the direction the vehicle is going may lead to thinking about the future. Facing backwards can help you to remember your past and the work just completed. Facing sideways may lead to acting in suspension from past and future. But most people have reported that *all travelling* tends to relieve the pressure of jobs, interpersonal relationships and external worries.

D. SHOPPING

ARTISTS WHO UTILIZE MATERIALS IN THEIR WORK—painters, sculptors, filmmakers—often make ritual shopping visits as a precursor to creative work. People who do not wish to relate to others beyond the superficial "How are you today?" of tradespeople, often find these buying jaunts very satisfying. It gets them out of the studio, into an activity involving a bit of mild exercise, and into the world. In a way, it offers the feeling that you have already begun the day's work.

Playing at shopping means going out to shop without knowing what you want to purchase. This uses the acquisitive instincts to search out your latent fantasies. Passing a shop window and becoming excited about a particular cuckoo clock may invoke folk art or woodcarvings, or even a notion of time itself. Some find the local magazine store to be a home base for every morning's walk, while others enjoy the local pet shop or supermarket.

Shopping can also be a vehicle for assertiveness exercises before the resumption of an art work which needs an effort of will. Returning that blouse or imperfect canvas to a particularly obnoxious shopkeeper tends to do wonders for self-esteem. Shopping for a book or a new shirt often allows you to define what your values are at a particular moment.

E. CREATIVE TELEVISION

THERE ARE A NUMBER OF WAYS TO USE TV as a catalyst for creative work. The following exercises can be done alone or in a group.

- 1) Turn the TV to any station, with the sound off. Watching the silent TV program, have fun inventing the probable situation, and then create some of the dialogue. Take different parts, changing your voice to suit the particular character that is speaking.
- 2) If you can freely adjust the color, sit before the screen and change the colors as the mood of the show changes. Then try creatively to manipulate a non-broadcast channel, treating the random patterns of color as an abstract, animated painting.
- 3) Pay attention to TV commercials. Create an absurd product in your mind, and try to devise an equally absurd commercial for it. Devise a humorous commercial for your own work.

F. YOGA

CREATIVE PEOPLE WERE AMONG THE FIRST Westerners to explore Oriental meditation and exercises, which can calm the mind and body as well as recharge energy. Below are some exercises that have proved effective for artists. Any of the various books concerned with meditation exercises will give you other options.

1) SAVA SANA YOGA:

a) Lie on your back with feet slightly apart, arms spread. Relax the muscles gradually, from your toes upwards through your body to your jaw, face, and eyes. When your muscular system is relaxed, slowly take a deep breath. Hold it for a few seconds. Then slowly exhale. Wait a few seconds, and slowly breathe in again. As you inhale, imagine energy being drawn into your system. As you exhale slowly, direct this force to every part of your body.

b) Lie quietly, with eyes closed, and imagine the most beautiful spot in the universe. Enter this place and walk around, smelling and touching all that is there. In the distance, try to see the work that you want to create. Imagine yourself slowly walking towards this work so that you might see it more clearly.

2) YOGA MEMORY EXERCISE: Sit in a comfortable posture, eyes closed. Remember back to somewhere you lived years ago. In memory, go through the front door, and walk through the rooms, trying to picture everything as it was—the furniture, the colors of the walls, the smells, even the sounds. Come back to this dwelling again and again.

3) COLOR EXERCISE: Lie on your back, feet and arms spread slightly apart. Close your eyes and visualize a color. Try to clear away all other images but the pure color. Then move through the spectrum to the next color. Then move to the next, and slowly around the color wheel until you end up at the first color.

4) ASTRAL SPACE TRIP: Seated comfortably with legs crossed and eyes closed, imagine yourself as a spirit inside your physical body. Take ten deep Sava Sana breaths. Now imagine your spirit lifting off from your physical being, floating up and through whatever physical barriers exist. Imagine yourself looking down at the earth as it grows smaller and smaller. You are now floating gently in space. Whenever you wish, float back to your body and open your eyes.

G. TALKING TO YOURSELF

MANY ARTISTS ALREADY KEEP JOURNALS. Usually bits and pieces of creative ideas find their way into them, along with computations of money earned, a friend's birthday, and future plans. Extend the scope of such meditations to viewing yourself and your life from different angles. For example, try to remember who you were years ago, and write about yourself now from these younger eyes. Or choose a time that you were very anxious or upset and, with the thoughts and feelings of that period, look ahead to who you are and where you are now. Below, I've listed a number of exercises that may be of value to you.

- 1) Begin to speak to yourself into a tape-recorder, in your normal voice. When you feel the urge, answer that voice in another voice. Try to get a little conversation going.
- 2) Do a simple drawing of yourself. Then, next to it, draw another person. Now draw a comic strip balloon above the first figure and write in a few words of dialogue. Then draw the balloon above the second person, and write in an answer to the first person's words. Continue the dialogue on succeeding pages.
- 3) Ask your stationary store for a roll of paper. Feed it through your printer or sit down and begin to write on it with a pen or pencil. Write anything that comes to mind: letters, numbers, gibberish, dialogues, thoughts. The only rule is

that you must do so for at least twenty minutes without stopping. Go as fast as you can, trying to get your fingers to catch up with your thoughts.

- 4) Go to your nearest instant-photo booth or copy machine. Take 25-50 pictures of yourself in a variety of expressions (pictures can be taken with a copy machine by pressing your face against the glass plate). Take the images home, place them on the floor, and try to arrange them in a sequence that tells a story. On the pictures, write what the character might be thinking.
- 5) If you have a piano, even if you do not play, create two musical voices, one with the left hand and one with the right. Even if you just bang your fists on four or five keys, keep it up. Create a dialogue between your two hands. If you don't have a piano, use two toy musical instruments.

H. INTERPERSONAL CREATIVITY

COLLABORATIVE WORK CAN BE VERY STIMULATING and can serve to ease the various individuals into their creative processes by offering supportive companionship. You may find that the following exercises aid your work processes, and are just plain fun to do with people you enjoy.

- 1) COLLABORATIVE DRAWING: The first person draws in a small area of a piece of paper, stops, and gives the paper to the next person. The next person draws a bit and then gives the paper back to the first person or on to the third.
- 2) BLOT-PICTURES: The first person creates an ink or watercolor blot on a piece of paper by wetting the paper and dropping on inks of various colors. When the blot is dry, the second person tries to find an image in the blot, bringing it out with markers.
- 3) SCROLL DRAWING: The first person takes a small roll of memo paper, unrolls a bit of it, and does a drawing. This is given to the next person who unrolls a bit

more, *continuing* the drawing as an unbroken seam. This can continue from person to person.

- 4) ROCK GARDEN: Two or more people choose an area outside that they feel deserves creative manipulation. Then each goes in search of natural building elements: pebbles, stones, bark, twigs, leaves. They reassemble and take turns placing their elements in, on, and around the site.
- 5) CONSTRUCTION: Two or more people collect and cut different shapes and kinds of wood. Then, using hammer and nails, and glue, each person adds one piece of wood at a time to a construction.
- 6) ROUND-ROBIN STORYTELLING: The first person makes up the first line of a story. Each person then adds a line to the whole, taking the story off into different directions.
- 7) JAMMING: Each person chooses a few unusual musical instruments such as toys, glass goblets filled with water or spoons. One person begins a percussive rhythm and the others choose an instrument and join in.
- 8) BODY JAMMING: Each person explores, within the context of a group jam session, all the sounds that can be made with one's body, playing percussion on the stomach, chest, and cranium, and using the vocal chords and nasal passages for melody. The jamming might also extend to playing each other's bodies.
- 9) MIME: Two or more persons agree to communicate only nonverbally for a given period of time, using improvised or existing sign language, facial gestures, and pre-verbal sounds.

